

# **ESCAPE TO A FIRING SQUAD**

*by Bob Masters*

**And other stories**



**A DAILY MIRROR BOOK**

THE FIRST STORY in this book, 'Escape to a Firing Squad,' won the £5000 first prize in the *Sunday Pictorial* War Story Contest.

The competition was organized to discover the best I WAS THERE story, the only condition being that the entrants should be ordinary folk—not brasshats. Apart from the first prize, there were also ten other prizes of £100.

So successful was the idea of the competition, that no less than 6600 vividly told war stories poured into the *Sunday Pictorial* offices. They came from all over the world.

Since space could be found in the newspaper to publish only a few of the entries, and since so many of the stories were so good, it was decided to publish the best of them in book form.

Here, then, are the prize-winners—and the 'near-misses'.

THEY ARE SELECTED AND EDITED BY

*Victor Sims*

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**Sunday Pictorial Newspapers Ltd. 1909**

**Made and printed in Great Britain by  
Hutchinson Printing Trust  
at The Anchor Press, Ltd., Tiptree, Essex**

# **ESCAPE—TO A FIRING SQUAD**

*by Bob Masters*

WE WERE in slit-trenches at Rouvray on June 4, 1940 when a signal was flashed that 'one or two' German tanks had broken through the French front line. These would soon be mopped up, we were told, and there was no immediate cause for alarm or action on our part.

But for the next couple of days we, the 1st Battalion of the South Wales Borderers, were repeatedly dive-bombed and machine-gunned by enemy Junkers planes. We gave them as good as we got, firing at them with every weapon we possessed, but they kept coming at us, wave upon wave of them.

The German fighters and dive-bombers were still harassing us on June 8, and we were forced to take cover in our trenches from dawn to ten o'clock, when fresh news came through from HQ. 'Retreat', said the order. 'Leave your positions and head for Rouen. If you are not there before 17.30 hours, you've bought it. The Army is blowing up the bridge at that time.'

The next few hours had a real nightmare quality. Every time we moved we were spotted by Junkers. We kept diving behind hedges or anything that looked like cover.

So slowly did we progress that by about 16.00 hours we had covered only five kilometres, and still had another twenty-five kilometres to go before we reached Rouen.

We stood at some crossroads studying the route and

listened to the rumble of approaching tanks. Could these be ours? And a lift to Rouen? Gradually, the squeaking of the caterpillars grew nearer. They were approaching from a hill directly in front of us.

Each man among us held his breath. Rouen by 17.30 hours. Our hopes crashed when over the top of the hill, some forty yards from us, a monster tank appeared adorned with a huge black cross. Immediately, a hail of tracer bullets came from the tank, deliberately fired *over* our heads. This scattered us to a ditch on the side of the road. Frantically we fired our rifles at it, our bullets pinging off its hull, but the tank came on, grinding to a halt beside us.

Slowly, the turret opened, and a peak-capped German officer raised himself.

He was the first German I had come face to face with. And in his hand was a revolver.

Pointing cheekily towards us he said: 'For you, Tommies, the war is over. I have a machine-gun trained upon you. Raise your hands slowly.' We stood and watched helplessly as our rifles were placed alongside the ditch and the tank ran over them, crushing them to pulp. We were told to keep our hands raised and proceed in the direction whence the tank had come. On reaching the brow of the hill we were amazed to see the number of vehicles travelling in our direction . . . lorries, tanks, guns, weapon carriers, cars and everything necessary to keep the Nazi Panzer divisions on the move to overrun Europe.

We had walked about half a mile and had by this time ventured to lower our arms. From each wagon that passed us the Nazi driver leaned out and spat at us. With some scores having passed one could imagine how we felt. We were met on the road by a German and turned into a field, where a hundred or so British prisoners had preceded us. We were a sorry, dusty, dejected group, some of us wounded, all of us bewildered by the apparent might and efficiency of the Germans.

By nightfall there were about 500 of us. It was a sad day for the British Army.

The next morning we were rounded up and marched to Cambrai, to a French barracks, where we stayed while the Germans swept through France. It was at Cambrai that the Germans took photographs of us for propaganda purposes. We did not realize that we were being 'used' at the time.

Rations were scarce during the days at Cambrai, and our daily food consisted of a small ladle of soup. One afternoon the Germans shouted they were going to throw some bread out of the stores window at a given time. Every prisoner in the barracks crowded around as near as they could get to that window. The window was thrown open on time and some bread tossed out. The scramble that followed had to be seen to be believed. We fought, rolled in the dust, did anything to grab a piece of that precious food. Little or no notice was taken of the photographers in the stores window.

We were moved from Cambrai in France to Thorn in Poland in cattle trucks, sixty-three to a truck: only half could sit down at one time. This journey took three days, stopping only four times. The conditions were appalling. Some of the men had dysentery, after eating mildewed bread which was thrown into the truck on one of the stops. A pigsty smelled much sweeter. Boots were used for toilet purposes and for other parts of toilet men were lifted up to a small window with iron bars.

On arrival at Thorn, bright sunshine poured down on the railway siding. Hunger and weakness had now set in. Painfully, I crawled out of the truck: it took me all my strength to stand. Weakness and the hot sun made it quite an effort.

Our 'home' at Thorn, 120 miles north-west of Warsaw, was an old moated Polish fort, with dark, dingy rooms, and dank, sweating walls like Dartmoor.

It was overcrowded with British prisoners from many

famous regiments, and the crew of a submarine which had been sunk off Norway. And more were flooding in every day.

The food was deplorable and we were near starvation. The midday meal consisted of one small ladle of watery swede or carrot soup; tea was one two-pound loaf of black bread between five. The cutting of the bread was done with meticulous ceremony, four pairs of eyes watching the handler. The measuring into five was done with the aid of our identity discs—the width of these discs made exactly five portions.

Imagine a room containing two hundred hungry men split into groups of five, some on tables, some on the beds, and others sprawled on the floor. During mealtimes the atmosphere became tense, everyone watching and awaiting their 'chunk'.

Savage fights would break out. Two or three 'cutters' would imagine themselves smarter than the others. Although we were almost too weak to stand, the fights were fierce. Men would swing and bash each other into a bloody mess. It was common to see a British prisoner stretched out on the floor, his chunk of bread lying beside him.

One day, three of us were picked to wash the tins in the guards' cookhouse. If we worked well, we thought we might get a helping of food. With the very little strength we had, and between dizzy spells, we scrubbed, polished and shone, but towards the end of our task it became apparent that we were to get nothing. It was from that moment that real hatred grew in me.

Our compensation came from out of the blue, our final task being the emptying of the swill bins. What a feast we had . . . prune-stones and handfuls of custard, with an occasional garnishing of carrot. Filthy and degrading? Yes. But I was starving.

In the days before Red Cross parcels and English cigarettes, we got an issue of tobacco called Majorka. This



was very dark, and was so strong that it was impossible for us to smoke. I do not think that any Britisher ever smoked it, until one day someone found a 'treatment' for it.

This consisted of three to four hours' boiling. When the water became black, it was poured off and refilled with clean water. The whole process was repeated until the water eventually became pale.

The water was then poured off and the weed placed on paper to dry in the sun. The finished article looked exactly like tea-leaves.

Even after 'treatment' it was still strong, but could be endured for four to five puffs, or at least until 'traffic lights' appeared before the eyes. The only thing to do then was to lie down until it wore off.

As more POWs were crammed into the prison camp, the rations seemed to lessen. I was horrified to see a living skeleton . . . a British soldier. He was sick, and slowly starving; he walked by helping himself along the wall. Eventually he was spared further ordeals . . . he died.

By Christmas 1900 the first Red Cross parcels began to arrive. What a sight! Grown men walking around the compound with their precious parcels tucked under their arms. Much too dangerous to leave it on the bed: someone may get ideas. With the first arrival of these parcels minor 'business men' set themselves up. Non-smokers became tycoons overnight. Fifty cigarettes was handsome capital—two fags for a tin of spam, two smokes for a bar of chocolate; and so the trading went on.

Months dragged by in a slow torture of hopelessness, boredom and despair. The Germans told us nothing. We were being left to stew in our own juice. But even if we had known what was going on in the war, it would probably have only served to make us even more wretched and miserable.

In the bitterly cold mid-winter of 1901 we were ordered to go out on working parties. Groups of up to fifty were picked for farms, roads and sugar factories. My first working

party took me to Guttowitz, three and a half hours' train ride away.

Our major task at Guttowitz was road building and repairs. We left our billet each morning at 4.30 a.m. and were taken by train some fifteen kilometres to a small town.

The thermometer read something like thirty-eight degrees below zero, and although no one prisoner was in favour of enhancing the progress of Hitler, one had to work to keep alive from the cold.

There were occasions when we felt 'under the weather', and I remember one morning I was in this category. The other lads in the billet got ready for work. I told our NCO (Sgt. Derek Poynton, Grenadier Guards) how I felt, and he reported this to the German guards.

The men were called outside on parade and when they had left the room in stamped two German guards. I could see the faces of my comrades crowding around the window outside. One of the guards came up to my bed, and ordered me in a thick voice to get up. I told him I was sick.

He said he would give me three chances to get out, and brought his rifle into the aim position, shouting '*Auf Stehen*' (get up).

I again said: 'I am sick.'

He repeated it the second time, and again I said: 'I'm sick.'

He cocked his rifle, and with a very red face again bel-lowed, '*Auf Stehen*.'

The barrel of that rifle appeared to me to be one big hole. Thoughts of death and mutilation raced through my mind, but before I realized it I uttered: 'I'm sick.'

The guard made a quick movement, but immediately the other guard jumped to his side, and snatched the rifle from him.

I remember a lot of shouting in German. I also remember a shout of triumph from my comrades at the window.

I cannot for the life of me even to this day understand

what prompted me to defy that guard. I am not a strong individual. The backfire of a car makes me jump.

I stayed away from work that day. It took an hour or so before I fully realized what had happened. When it came home to me, I was heartily sick.

The first man on parade the next morning was *me*.

After some weeks I was returned to the prison fort at Thorn and then sent out to a farm party at Lichnau, a small village five kilometres from Konitz, near the German border. On these farm parties there were fewer restrictions than at Thorn. Two German guards were in charge of twenty-eight POWs at Lichnau. The guards were usually C.3 soldiers—older men not fit enough for front-line service. They regarded their jobs as 'cushy' and we regarded them as imbeciles.

Many times one of us sacrificed a tin of pure coffee to be sent home to the guards' wives, merely to show them that the German blockade was not as effective as their papers made out. The wives were asking themselves why *they* had to make do with ersatz coffee.

By this time some of us now spoke and studied the language for our own convenience. The Polish people were discouraged from using their own language, and since many Poles could speak German, the Teutonic tongue was useful to us.

Our billet in Lichnau was an army hut, built some two feet off the ground. This gave us the idea for our 'trap hatches' and we had many a night out with the village 'belles'. To me now, the risks we took for these jaunts are hair-raising. It sounds ridiculous that, as a POW, one could go courting, but all but three or four members of that party participated, probably four during the one night, the others covering up for them.

In the summer of 1943 I began to work for a Volks Deutsch (German by birth) farmer whose name was Fishnewski. He had a son, aged sixteen. I became quite friendly with him and it was not long before I could talk

freely to him of escape, civilian clothes, and what could be bought (secondhand) in exchange for chocolate, coffee, cocoa or soap from our Red Cross parcels.

Weeks of talking on this subject, and saving the necessary goods for purchase, brought to me a plan which I thought was quite feasible and, with luck, could work out.

He told me that a train left Konitz every evening at 8 p.m. for Berlin and that others obviously left Berlin for France. . . . Who knows? from France, I might get back to England.

Railways tickets could only be bought by persons with an Ausweis, a sort of passport, and Jan Fishnewski said that he would buy one for me. To an adventurous youngster like him, this was cloak-and-dagger stuff (I really think he believed me to be a British agent). To me it was much more serious than that. After some days of pondering on it, I really thought the plan had possibilities and decided to go through with it. Zero hour was arranged for a Sunday evening. Jan informed me that he had acquired a pair of trousers, a raincoat, trilby hat, shirt and tie but no jacket. After all, the raincoat would cover this deficiency.

Each Sunday we went to individual farms for a midday meal and on that Sunday in September 1943 I agreed to meet Jan secretly in the evening at a spot near our camp. There I could change into civilian clothes and then make for Konitz, he going on ahead to purchase the ticket.

To my horror, at 7 p.m. that evening the head guard decided to hold an inspection of all kits, which had to be laid out on the beds for him. My bed was about the fifteenth in the hut and at about 7.20 p.m. he started the inspection. This was a blow, especially when I saw how much time he spent on each one. It did not occur to me that this would be an eventual asset. . . . If I was about number fifteen, then the time he took to inspect the remaining thirteen kits would allow me ample breathing space to make my 'gallop' to Jan Fishnewski at our rendezvous.

Naturally, all member of the hut knew of my plans and as soon as the guard had passed my bed, an 'all clear' signal

was given me from the door and I casually strolled to the toilets outside. There was no barbed wire surrounding the hut and once outside the road was clear. The direction I wanted to take was screened by the toilets and behind them I immediately put on speed.

I reached Jan, who, I found, had not only the civilian clothes, but also two bicycles. In my civilian clothes, I did not exactly feel a 'man about town'. I am nearly six feet, and the trousers were made for a man around five feet six inches. The raincoat hid the gap between trousers and stomach, and the trilby was 'out of this world'.

I had about £27 in German currency. Money was easy to get by selling woollen socks, cardigans and soap to the Poles. A POW only needed German money for escaping since it was otherwise absolutely useless to us. Nothing in a prisoner's ordinary life could be bought with it.

Pedalling furiously, we reached the station at Konitz. The cycles were parked at the entrance and Jan strolled casually to the ticket office and returned to me with the precious ticket.

The station was filling up quite a bit. German soldiers were coming and going on leave. There was much kissing of families and sweethearts.

I immediately took up my position in the corridor. I would be less conspicuous there, I thought. With a clanging of the bell, the train pulled out. A large sign loomed up before me, one the Germans used throughout to boost the morale of the people. It read: *Die Raden müssen rollen für den Sieg* (The wheels must roll for Victory).

Before boarding the train, Jan explained to me that one change had to be made for Berlin . . . and that I would be forced to wait nearly three hours for a connection. So as soon as I reached that station, I hurried to the waiting-room and found a corner seat near a table.

The last thing I wanted was to be dragged into conversation with anyone. Naturally, I spoke German with an accent and this would easily arouse suspicion. I removed my

trilby, rested my hands on the table, lowered my head on to my hands and pretended to be asleep. Funnily enough, I did doze off—probably through the tension of getting away and the journey so far. I did not sleep for long. On awakening, I felt cramped and would very much have liked a stroll on the platform, but to me it seemed safer to remain where I was.

At last the train pulled in. I boarded it and once again stood in the corridor. This time, I held a crumpled German newspaper in my hand—one that had been discarded in the waiting-room. I remember the headline 'Battle of Salerno'.

I noticed a man farther along the corridor. But he didn't appear to be paying any attention to me. He just stared out at the rolling countryside.

Now I felt a little more confident, and reached in my pocket for one of my precious cigarettes. They were English smokes, sent by the Red Cross.

I lit up, and puffed with a sigh of satisfaction. The effect on the man in the corridor was electric.

He began to sniff as the strange smelling smoke drifted along towards him. What a fool I was! Here was I, drawing on an English cigarette in the heart of wartime Germany!

I don't say that the stranger realized or knew that it was an English cigarette. But he knew it was quite different from the cigarette smoke he was used to smelling.

Continental cigarettes have that cabaret dive-bar aroma about them. English ones smell like new-mown hay.

As soon as the stranger looked towards me, I knew that I had made a silly mistake.

I made my way to the toilet and allowed enough time to elapse to go back *without* the cigarette. I have 'leaned' on cigarettes ever since I began to smoke, and it almost broke my heart to drop the packet with the remainder of the cigarettes into the toilet. I returned to the corridor and took up my position leaning against the side and looking through the window.

The stranger had disappeared, and I began to breathe again. After an all-night journey the train reached Berlin. The next step was to get a meal. I had learned before setting out that a light meal could be bought on stations and in cafés without a ration card; a meal of salad or a bowl of soup. I made my way to the station restaurant which was packed with civilians and German soldiers. However, I had to eat. I stayed in that restaurant for hours, summoning up my courage, and thinking desperately of the next move. How could I get the ticket to France without an Ausweis?

Cautiously, I approached a station official—the dumbest looking one I could spot, and asked him about the trains to France. I told him that I was a French worker going home on leave.

He informed me that no trains left that station for any part of France. I would have to cross the whole of Berlin to the Freidrichstrasse Station. The best way to get there was by U-Bahn, the underground railway.

It took me practically all day to find the U-Bahn, make the journey, and reach the other side of the German capital. By the time I reached Freidrichstrasse Station it was dusk, and the air-raid sirens wailed their warning.

People began to run to air-raid shelters, searchlights were dancing about in the sky and I made a bee-line for the shelters, together with the rest of the crowd.

I did not hear any bombs fall, and after thirty minutes the 'all clear' sounded. We all filed out and I made my way to the railway ticket office. I chose a counter where an attractive girl issued tickets, and approached her boldly.

Luck seemed to be with me. I asked her for a ticket to Metz, across the German border in north-eastern France, explaining that I had left my Ausweis in my other clothes, and was going on leave to France. She seemed to give me a knowing look. But then she smiled, handed me the ticket, and wished me a good journey. It all seemed so easy. Too easy.

As the train pulled out for Metz, I took up my place in the

corridor. This train was much more crowded. After about one hour's travelling time, a man edged closer to me. I did not take much notice of him at first. There were many men on that train.

Through the reflection in the window I saw that he had some kind of badge in his lapel, though I could not make out what it meant. From time to time our eyes met embarrassingly through the window reflection.

I was uneasy. Something had to be done to eliminate any suspicion this man may have had about me. I bent down and placed my folded newspaper on the floor. Then, I took off my trilby and placed that on top of it. This, I hoped, would demonstrate that I was reserving my standing space in the corridor—which seemed to be the practice on that train—while I went to the toilet.

With a nonchalant air, I strolled into the toilet and stayed there, my heart thumping, for ten minutes, hoping that the German in civvy clothes would have gone by the time I came out. But he was still there. Again, as casually as my trembling frame would allow, I took up my place beside him. By trying not to avoid him, I gambled that any suspicion he may have had would be dispelled by my return beside him.

But it was not to be. He began to engage me in conversation. His steely grey eyes pierced into me as he asked: 'What is your nationality?'

It had worked before. I tried it again. 'I am a French worker going home on leave,' I replied.

Now the questions came, fast and furious. Where did I work in Germany? How long had I worked there? Where was I going? Had I got my Ausweis? Where were the papers showing my length of leave? Who sanctioned them?

A tremor of fear seized me, and I broke into a cold sweat, as I struggled to explain that my papers were left in my other clothes, and that I would forward them if necessary.

He thrust his hand deep into the pocket of his bulging



overcoat, and warned me that he was from the Gestapo. He said that we would get off at the next station, and that he could soon verify what I had told him.

I sensed that it was hopeless to keep up my pretence. The more trouble I put them to, the greater would be my punishment from the Germans. I confessed that I was an escaped prisoner.

Back at the grim fort of Thorn, I was 'tried' for my escape, and thrown into the 'cooler' for seven days on bread and water. Haggard, and hungry, I was brought out into the daylight and questioned over and over again about the only thing they wanted to know: where did I get my civilian clothes?

I stuck to the story I told the Gestapo man on the train. . . . I had stolen them.

It puzzled me when I heard that I was being sent back to Lichnau. This was unheard of. Any prisoner who escaped from a camp was never allowed to go back to that same camp. Were they hoping that, if I was returned to Lichnau, I would somehow betray Jan, the boy who provided the clothes for my escape? I was determined that this should not happen, and I made it quite clear that the only reason I tried to escape was that I did not like working at Fishnewski's farm.

They must have believed me, because I was sent to work for Herr Swietlik, the most unfriendly German I met in the whole of my five and a half years' captivity. My arrival seemed to bring him bad luck. His hens would not lay, and his farm machinery broke down, so he took his revenge on me. He made me slave until I was a miserable, starving, wretched and degraded scrap of humanity. It was hard to convince myself that I was a British soldier.

By the summer of 1944 the German people were not quite so confident about victory. They would openly ask our opinion of the outcome of the war, and always our answer would be the same: 'Sooner or later we, or the Russkis, will come.'

The months that followed brought news of the Allied push through France, and of the Russian advance from the East. The steady progress of the Russians was more important to us, because they were nearer.

Although delighted at such news, we had anxious thoughts. Reports had filtered through to us about the dreaded concentration camps at Dachau and Belsen. What would the Germans do to us if they became really desperate? Some suggested that they would just enter the camp with machine-guns and mow us down.

By December 1844 we were shivering in thirty-eight degrees below. Through the heavy snow came the faint murmur of Russian guns. At the end of January, as we froze in the icy grip of winter, the Russians had reached Bromberg . . . only forty-seven miles away from our camp.

A tremor of excitement ran through me as I thought once more of escape. Why not get away to the Russians?

The Wehrmacht was becoming active in our area, the German border being only a few miles away. It seemed likely that they were massing their troops for the defence of their own country. It was possible that the Russians would be driven back, and that would mean more hopeless years of captivity for us. The great problem was: how to escape with all those troops around?

The second week of February 1845 we returned from work one evening to a buzz of activity. Guards ordered us to parade with essential kit. We were moving off in thirty minutes. With bags, hold-alls, boxes, and what-have-you, we were marched to Konitz, five kilometres away, and herded into a big barracks. All through the day, other POWs had been converging on Konitz.

The Russian advance must have been temporarily halted, for we were once again sorted out for local working parties. I was put to work at a mill, and in my party was a good pal, Pte Jimmy Gillan of the Royal Engineers.

Though it was too bitterly cold to think much about anything, Jimmy and I became obsessed with plans for a

getaway to the Russians. Some of our mates said it was madness—the area was swarming with German storm-troopers. But we paid no heed, and continued to make our plans.

Clothes, once again, became priority, and as we worked at the mill, we held a secret consultation with some Polish workers, to see if they could help. Happily, they produced two old pairs of blue dungarees, and two grey cloth caps. These, we hid under a pile of sacks in the boiler house, to be called for when the time was ripe.

Jimmy and I agreed that if we could slip through the cordon of guards, it would be wiser to make for Lichnau, and Fishnewski's farm. It was in the right direction, and we could, perhaps, rely on the old man and his son, Jan, to help us on our way.

We trudged through the deep snow to the mill one morning, side by side, whispering excitedly to each other out of the side of our mouths. We were both on edge, for we knew this was it. The time had come to make a break for it.

As we unloaded bags of oats from a farm cart, I watched our solitary guard stroll towards the mill gate, then up the main road. He always did this at eleven o'clock. It was time for his mug of ersatz coffee. Swiftly, Jimmy and I darted to the boiler house. We pulled the dungarees over our battle-dress, put on our cloth caps, and made for the entrance.

Looking up the main road, we could still see the guard strolling casually along, apparently very interested in everything he saw. With a farewell wave to the remainder of the boys in the mill, we crossed the main road, slipped into a fairly large porch of a house and awaited the return of the guard to the mill.

We both agreed not to walk through the town briskly, in military style. It would be better for one to limp, and one to stoop, for all active, able-bodied Poles had long been removed from the area by the Nazis, and whisked off into the unknown. If we appeared to be two upright men, with

no important job to do for the Germans, we would be spotted at once.

Before the returning guard realized that we were missing, Jimmy and I were on our way through the town. We dodged into a Polish coal merchant's yard, and chanced explaining to him who we were. He seemed delighted, shook our hands, and wished us good luck. Then, with a pick and shovel he gave us, we made our way out of town, one limping, one walking with a stoop, two ardent workers for the 'Fatherland'.

We knew we had to go under a railway bridge, sand-bagged in zig-zag fashion, and heavily mined, with two sentries at each end. It was now past midday and we were near the bridge. The guards were eating their midday meal from mess tins, sitting on the ground, backs against the wall.

My heart was pounding. Would they recognize us?

We hobbled past, pick and shovel over our shoulders. The guards looked up. We passed the time of day and they grunted a reply.

Halfway through the bridge we looked at each other; two very pale individuals indeed. One more obstacle—the guards at the other end. They, too, were spooning from their mess tins. Once again we greeted them and they waved us on.

After leaving the bridge, the first bend in the road was a quarter of a mile off: this meant we were in full view of the guards for that distance. About one hundred yards up the road we decided to clear one of the snowed-up ditches on the side of the road, to convince the guards, who might still be watching, that we were conscientious labourers.

I remember we made a fine job of that ditch; we spent nearly fifteen minutes on it, working damned hard, smoothly patting down the snow at the sides, cleaning off the shovel, and proceeded farther along the road, stopping here and there for an occasional clearance of the ditch. Finally as we

moved out of sight, both limp and stoop left us and we hurried to Fishnewski's farm at Lichnau.

The entrance to Fishnewski's farm was on the main road. We could see the big barn to the right of the farm, and ploughed our way through the deep snow to it, half running, stumbling and falling.

We lay, exhausted, in the barn, emptied our waterlogged boots, and huddled together for warmth. Our dungarees and uniforms underneath were saturated with icy water. I looked at my frost-bitten fingers . . . and panicked. They had turned yellow in the sub-zero cold.

I peered through a slit in the barn door. There was no sign of Fishnewski or his son, but I saw Stefan, the son of Frau Olek, a Polish woman on the farm, go past and called to him softly. He knew me. We had previously worked together on this farm.

Stefan whistled with surprise when he saw us hidden there. He told us to wait while he went to tell his mother at a nearby cottage. He came back with a large loaf, and a small can of lumpy tasteless porridge, but it was like dining at the Ritz.

That night we almost died from the intense cold. Shivering in our wet clothes, we tried to bury ourselves among sheaves of rogen (rye) for warmth.

At daybreak, Jimmy said he was packing in, and would try to take his chance on a milk cart with a Polish driver. I have not seen him since that moment.

Now I was alone. With Nazi SS troops all round me, I felt very sorry for myself indeed and, optimistic as I may be, I did not give much for my chances. I prayed to God for help, and this did give me the boost I needed.

Stefan and his mother were kind to me. In a raging blizzard the boy brought me a can of hot soup, two cigarettes and some matches. I would not have sold those two cigarettes and matches for £5 each.

The couple offered to hide me in the loft above their

cottage, but I declined, fearing the Germans would find me and that the Oleks would be shot.

The second cold, dark evening, I heard voices in the yard, but could not make out what they were saying. I was scared, and dashed from my hiding place to another barn like a frightened animal. This barn was full of roggens, except for about two and a half feet at the top. Desperately I scrambled up there, but got a shock.

Hundreds of rifles were piled there . . . hidden by partisans. But I stayed the night, afraid that if I were caught, I would be executed as one of them, for I had no means of identification.

Before daylight, on the next wintry morning, I crept to Frau Olek's cottage, and tapped lightly on the window. She let me in, and hurriedly showed me the ladder leading to the loft.

That night Stefan brought me an old, tattered eiderdown, and I sat, huddled in the corner, with it wrapped around me.

For ten days and nights during that Arctic February 1945, as Siberian winds howled, and snow piled against the small cottage, I stayed in the loft. I could hear the crump of shells creeping closer each hour. Were the Russians coming?

I peered out of a two-inch gap in the wooden struts of the loft, and felt pity at what I saw.

Lines of bedraggled Nazi troops, heads bent low against the bitter gales, were streaming back in the direction of the German border. They looked ghostly shapes, in their hooded all-white snow uniforms. Some hobbled along, feet swathed in rags; some nursed wounded hands and arms wrapped in bandages. All of them showed the agony of frostbite on their lined faces. They were a defeated, dejected rabble of an army, glad to retreat from the savage, merciless Red hordes.

All through the night I could hear spasmodic machine-gun fire. I sat in the loft, huddled in the eiderdown, wondering what would come next.

The answer came at dawn. Waves of Russian fighters and bombers skimmed the tops of the farm and cottage, on their way to Konitz. Through my spy-hole I could see the Red Star markings on the planes, and tried to follow their direction to the town.

The first waves were already in action there. I could hear the incessant machine-gun fire, bombs, and the German ack-ack batteries. For an hour, hell was let loose, but then everything quietened and the thick snow seemed to bring a deathly silence.

Now came the ear-splitting crash of mortar bombs, followed by machine-gun fire. This was close. As I peered out, a shell ripped into the spire of Lichnau Roman Catholic Church.

Over the snow-clad hill before me came three mammoth tanks, with men clinging to the sides. They dipped out of my sight, and wheeled round in the direction of the farm.

Shouts came from the yard below: 'Russkis. . . Russkis . . .' At last! Once they knew I was a soldier of the British Army they would hug me, and set me free.

Suddenly, the door of the loft flew open, and I was confronted by a Cossack soldier in a sheepswool hat, tommy-gun firmly in his grasp.

He said something and made signs for me to come down. I did not get the smile and warm handshake that I had anticipated.

I tried to explain to him that I was English. But I had been a prisoner for so long, that I automatically argued in German. He kept waving his tommy-gun and shouting: '*Nimitsk . . . Nimitsk*', meaning that I was a German.

Frantically, Frau Olek pleaded with him not to shoot me. I was pushed roughly into a chair, and told to wait. By now I was beginning to wish that I had stayed with the Germans.

At nightfall the door was kicked open, and, in the lamp-light, I could see two Russians, both with tommy-guns trained on me.

Frau Olek wept as they pushed me through the door, and out into the snow. Was I destined for a firing squad? Or would they make short work of me on the spot? I prayed that either way they would get it over with quickly.

Outside it was pitch dark. The two Russian Tommy-guns beckoned me to walk ahead of them. I went forward, stumbling as they shoved me.

Twenty yards . . . fifty yards . . . I waited for bullets in the back. As we trudged, I could hear the crunch of their boots in the snow behind me, and the tinkle of their equipment, slung from a leather belt round the waist.

A sinister black object loomed in front of me. It was a Russian tank 'bedded' down for the night, right outside a cottage. One of the soldiers approached the front door. It opened, and inside, by the light of an oil-lamp on a table, I could see Russian officers sitting around.

I was hustled in. All eyes lifted from the maps they were studying. Some smiled, some scowled, and I was ordered to sit down. One of the officers, a chunky, round-faced man, chewing a short, black cigar, spoke to me in German. '*Verstehen sie Deutsch?*' I told him that I *did* understand German.

'Yet you claim to be an Englishman?'

I was only too eager to tell him that I was . . . but in German it did not sound convincing.

In a desperate effort to persuade him that I was really on his side, I told him that his troops should beware of the mined bridge at Konitz, and also described gun emplacements and anti-aircraft batteries in the area.

Had I seen signs on the German lorries? I told him that most of them bore a white polar bear emblem.

'Good,' he said. 'We have been chasing them for days.'

He must have been grateful for that information, for he ordered a portion of boiled goose to be brought to me, obviously some of the loot of the day.

As he watched me tearing it apart, ravenously, he



bombarded me with questions about my identity. At the end, he stubbed out his cigar and stood bolt upright. 'Well,' he said, 'we shall see whether you are English in the morning.'

He motioned me to a room. It was crammed with soldiers sleeping on the floor. I squeezed between two of them and, after moving their hand grenades over a little, I slumped down beside them. At least I would get one more night's sleep. The Russian soldiers grunted and snored, keeping me awake. It was all so strange. Finally, I dozed off.

I awoke with a start at dawn. Russian soldiers were stamping noisily in and out. Everybody seemed to be eating and drinking. They crammed their mouths with large chunks of bread cut with penknives, chattered, laughed aloud, slapped each other on the back. It reminded me of the days with my own comrades.

One soldier came over with a chunk of bread for me. All the others guffawed and pointed. '*Anglechaneen* . . . *Anglechaneen*.' I heard the word repeatedly, and at last realized that they were calling me an Englishman.

It made me feel better. If they believed my story there was a sporting chance of getting away from this trigger-happy mob.

My hopes were short-lived. The chunky Russian officer appeared in the doorway and told me that I was to be taken under escort to their field headquarters.

A weather-beaten, fierce-looking Cossack mounted a mule, and prodded me on my way through the deep snow. In the distance I could hear a barked order to a firing squad. I listened in horror to the burst of tommy-gun fire. The Russians were seeking terrible revenge for the atrocities of the Nazi invaders. My only hope was that I would not be counted as one of them.

My feet were soaked, and water squelched from my boots as I trudged through knee-high snow into a valley. Suddenly, heading right for us, was a fighter plane. My escort leaped

from his mule, and I quickly followed. Bullets sprayed round as we both lay face-down in the snow.

The Russian got up and looked at me with a broad grin, said something I did not understand, and let forth a chuckle. He must have thought we were initiated comrades, for he pulled out his tobacco pouch, tore off two strips of dirty newspaper, and rolled two cigarettes, one of which he handed to me.

He offered me a light. A few puffs, and I awaited the ecstasy of inhaling. Instead, the strength of the tobacco nearly choked me. I thought the Russian would choke with laughter.

After three or four miles we came to a large house. The Cossack pointed to it and nodded. At the gate were two Russian guards, and inside the courtyard stood more Tommy-guns, shepherding lines of red-eyed, unshaven, dejected civilians . . . all men of military age.

I watched them shuffle off, straggly lines of doomed men, whose weeping wives and sweethearts would probably never see them again.

A door opened, and a Russian officer, revolver tucked in his belt, bade me to enter. He motioned a squad of Tommy-guns to wait in the corridor.

Inside the room a heavily-built man in an immaculate uniform with red-and-gold epaulettes, sat behind a desk. He looked up from his papers, straight into my eyes. He began to smile, the kind of false smile reserved for turn-coat Quislings who were trying to be friendly to save their skins.

'You are English?' he asked. I was momentarily taken aback by his perfect Oxford accent. 'Yes,' I stammered.

'Have you any proof of this?'

Proof? How can you prove that you are English when you have been away from your home for nearly five years, and lost all means of identification?

As I stood there, I wondered how I must have looked to this well-fed, well-dressed, high-ranking Russian officer

My eyes had sunk deep into their sockets; my hair was matted and there was a two-week growth of stubble on my chin; my dungarees were ripped, soiled and saturated; my thin boots had split from toe to heel; I had not had a change of clothes for a month. I was like a hunted animal, a lost soul, disowned by everyone.

I fumbled in the breast pocket of my plain khaki battle-dress which, of course, bore no shoulder-flash of my regiment. That was removed when I was taken prisoner. I felt for my prisoner of war identity disc, then remembered I had lost it.

From my pocket I produced a letter, posted to me from my mother at Ilfracombe, and two photographs of some of my pals in British Army uniform.

'I think these will help,' I told the officer.

He studied them for a while, then looked at me intently. 'Anyone could have taken these from a British prisoner,' he said, sharply. 'Where do you live in England?'

As he spoke, he stood up. He was a man of enormous size, perhaps six feet four inches. I felt a dwarf beside him.

I told him that my home was at Liskeard, a market town in Cornwall, England.

'Oh,' he replied, 'then you must know Plymouth.'

I was about to tell him that I knew it well, when he bent over and hissed in my face: 'All right! How many miles is it from Liskeard to Plymouth—*by road*?'

This question shocked me. I knew the route well. Many times I had used it as a traveller for a hardware company. But my confused brain would not function. I struggled to find the right answer. Was it thirty-three miles? Thirty-four? Or thirty-five? There must be no mistake. My life was in the balance. It could hinge on a mile—one way or the other.

I told him that it was about thirty-four miles, but that I preferred to travel to Devonport, then cross on the ferry. This way, it was only about nineteen miles.

The officer seemed mildly convinced that I knew that

area . . . but so did many German spies. He paced the room thoughtfully. The officer with the revolver in his belt stood in the corner, looking on.

Suddenly, the big officer spun round. 'Are you a Nazi?' He shot the question at me. Before I could answer, he added, menacingly: 'You know what happens to them.'

He waited for my reply, eyes fixed on me, as though prepared to disbelieve whatever I told him.

Heatedly, I answered: 'We are supposed to be fighting a common enemy. I hate the Nazis so much that I will volunteer for your Army, and you can put me in the front line.'

I thought I had done myself some good by making this noble suggestion. But the big Russian's face puffed with rage. He thumped the desk with his huge fist, and shouted: 'We don't need *your* help to fight filthy Germans! How do I know you are not one of them?'

He rapped an order to the officer in the corner. Any second I expected to be dragged outside to join other unfortunates lined up before the trigger-itchy tommy-gunners.

I was in a spot. There seemed to be no way of proving my nationality, for the moment, at any rate. I was beginning to wonder myself whether I had been in the British Army, or whether it had just been a dream. It all seemed so long ago.

As I was led outside to the tommy-gunners, I yelled over my shoulder, pleading with the big Russian for one more chance to prove that I was English.

He heard me, and followed me out into the daylight. In front of him I tore open my shirt and pointed to my chest. 'Look at this!' I cried. 'Now do you believe I am English?'

He blinked in amazement at the large tattoo I bear of King George V and Queen Mary, with the Union Jack between them.

He rubbed his finger over the skin of my chest as he inspected the tattoos, hardly able to believe his eyes. He

studied the portrait of King George V very closely, and remarked on his likeness to the old Czar of Russia.

The Russians gaped as I stripped off and showed them all the rest of my tattoos—the emblems of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, with two hands crossing in the centre.

On my arms I have a naval design, butterflies, writhing pythons, a head of Buffalo Bill, and through my shoulder-blade, a tattooed dagger . . . all drawn by a tattoo artist in Hong Kong.

The big Russian beamed at me. 'You would hardly be a Nazi with such things on your chest,' he said. 'You are free.'

I whooped with joy. He shared my delight, and wrung my hand. It was then that I nearly fell backwards. He told me that he was a General in the Red Army.

He handed me a pass to verify my identity, written with indelible pencil and endorsed with a rubber stamp, and told me to make for Bromberg. From here, he said, I could get to Odessa, on the Black Sea.

A Russian sentry handed me a loaf of bread, pointed the direction I was to take, and I left the compound, lucky to be alive.

Sleet had started to fall. Bromberg was some sixty kilometres, and to go that distance through the Russian Army would be no mean feat, pass or no pass.

I trudged along, absolutely drenched. In the distance I could hear guns and I was heading in that direction.

At intervals, Russian soldiers would shout '*Hotch*' (come), and wave me towards them. They always challenged me for documents, and I produced my valuable piece of paper. With the sleet, and the soldiers' non-respect for my pass, the indelible writing soon became a smudgy mess, and after a few more stops it became unreadable. I had to re-trace my steps to the headquarters where I had undergone interrogation, and request another. This time I was handed a typewritten pass, and I started on my journey once more.

I decided that Bromberg was not for me. It might take a

year to get a ship home from the Black<sup>4</sup>Sea. I wanted to get to Berlin and meet up with the victorious Allied armies.

So, with a drenched overcoat, cloth cap, and a very squashy loaf of bread under my arm, I set out for Lichnau.

As I entered Lichnau, I looked aghast at the frozen bodies of Russians lying half-buried in the ice and snow. Corpses of Nazis who had been lined up and shot lay piled in heaps where they fell.

The retreating Germans were stubbornly defending Konitz with a heavy barrage of shells, and I was forced to dive for cover.

I scrambled into a hole in a wall, and lay there, shaking like a leaf. Beside me, stretched full length on his back, was a dead Russian soldier. He stared towards the sky, and, no matter how I tried, I could not keep my eyes off him.

The shelling stopped, and I ventured out on to the road. A Polish family named Bierlatski, whom I knew, had a cottage nearby, and it seemed a good idea to make for it.

Russian soldiers with tommy-guns cocked were rushing everywhere, but they were not too busy to ask for my pass. I reached the Bierlatski cottage, but found it packed with displaced persons and drunken Cossacks.

One of them beckoned me to follow him. Before long, we were at my old workplace, Swietlik's farm, which had now been taken over by the Russians as their field headquarters.

The wine-merry Russian guide, swaying unsteadily and slap-happily firing bullets in the air, led me to a dark cellar. Then, in sign language, with a finger drawn across his throat he warned me to stay down there.

Out of the darkness in the cellar I could see frightened eyes peering at me. I soon found that the dungeon was packed with Germans for whom I had 'worked' during my life as a prisoner of war.

As they recognized me, one by one, I heard them utter: 'Good God!' They began to murmur and whisper to each

other. There was no doubt what they were thinking. They believed me to be a British agent and, this being the case, that they were doomed.

If they had only known that it was my *own* doom that concerned me most. Why had the Russians put me among all these Germans? Having once escaped the firing squad, was I now to be executed as a Quisling?

I was determined to keep away from the others and remain quietly, in a corner, in case there were hidden microphones in the crevices of the walls.

A pile of old suitcases and bags rested in a corner of the cellar. They belonged to the Germans held captive there, but I opened one, and emptied the contents on the floor. A Russian sentry eyed me curiously.

I was searching for something to bandage my sore feet. The case contained various items of women's clothing, but I found a white tablecloth, tore it into strips, and wrapped the cloth round my feet. The Russian smiled and nodded: 'Da . . . da . . . da . . . da.' The Germans gave me sickly grins of false approval.

Feeling much more comfortable I turned my back on them and settled down for the night, to a symphony of whining shells overhead.

At daybreak, I demanded to see the Russian commandant, and brandished my pass at the sentry. He gave way, and took me upstairs. The commandant listened patiently to my complaint.

'Look,' I said to him. 'If you are going to keep me a prisoner, at least you could put me on my own, and not with a crowd of Germans.'

He seemed highly amused, and agreed to let me go to the Bierlatskis' cottage. This was to be my home for the next three months.

It took five or six days for the Russians to gain complete control of Konitz. House by house they inkled the Germans out, and the war swept onwards towards Berlin.

In the wake of it, I was left to eye-witness the occupation

of a small Polish town by revenge-seeking Russians. It was not a pretty sight.

One night, I was sleeping on the floor of the cottage when a shot rang out. I got up to investigate, fully expecting yet another suicide among the displaced persons. Instead, I saw two drunken Russian soldiers, one of whom was standing over a dead Polish girl, smoking revolver in his hand.

The soldiers had crept into the room where two pretty sisters slept together on the floor. They had tried to get between the girls, taking one apiece. In a struggle, one sister was shot in the mouth, the bullet making an ugly, gaping hole at the back of her head.

The next morning, a small cortège of weeping women made its way to the churchyard. They carried the body of this once-beautiful girl sewn into an old sheet.

The trigger-happy onward-sweeping Russians had to be handled with kid gloves, particularly if they had been drinking. When their supply of Vodka ran out they would drink anything to give them a 'kick'—even fly killer.

Wild-eyed with 'hooch', they would queue up to take women and girls. From one of these queues, a Russian soldier shouted something to me that meant: 'Come, Englishman,' and motioned to me to join the end of the queue.

All I could do was laugh it off, and make some gesture that I was too weak through my prisoner of war experiences. To which he hooted with laughter, and displayed to me his own physical fitness with certain gestures and exhibitionism.

Although my fearful experiences had toughened me to expect almost anything, never did I think I would be invited to rape, even against a race of people I had grown to hate. Had these Russians but known, there was only one real desire in my heart . . . to get away from them, and back to my beloved England and all its decencies.

That chance came, one beautiful May morning, when the news broke like a bombshell: Berlin had fallen.

Eagerly, I packed my few pathetic belongings into a



shabby carrier bag. All I possessed were an old vest and a pair of underpants without a seat in them, given to me by a friendly farmer, a shoddy wallet retrieved from a dustbin, and a rusty penknife. Then, with a pass from a jubilant Russian commandant, I set off for Berlin.

For three days and nights I was bumped and buffeted in clanging, jostling goods wagons. Sometimes I clung to the hand-rail of a steam engine that seemed likely to explode any moment. But it was worth the discomfort to ride triumphantly into the German capital.

In the devastated city, tens of thousands of dazed, shell-shocked Germans wandered aimlessly among the crumbled ruins of their homes. Smashed, burned-out tanks and street-cars lay at crazy, drunken angles. I picked my way through gaping bomb craters, past fire-scorched factories and smoking, smouldering shells of houses to catch a glimpse of a familiar khaki British uniform. But there was none. Our troops had halted at Magdeburg, on the other side of the Elbe.

For five days, while Berlin was in chaos, the Russians kept me in a large house, with an assortment of displaced and stateless persons, odd men out, vagrants and misfits who, like myself, were all looking for someone to belong to.

Then came news that I was being taken to Magdeburg, and handed over to the British authorities next day.

I could not sleep that night. My heart was racing with excitement at the thought of seeing my own people.

It was at eleven o'clock, as I stood outside the billet, that a Scots officer rode into the compound on a motor-cycle. I rushed over to him before he had time to stop his engine. I remember wringing his hand, and patting him on the back. Oh boy! That man was a hero in my eyes.

He must have realized my feeling of immense relief. He let me go on fuss-making, pulled out his cigarettes, lit one himself, and gave me the remainder of the packet.

In a few minutes a lorry had called to collect me, and I jumped in the back before anyone could change their

minds. A few minutes' palaver between our officers and the Russians and we were on our way.

I was like a child at a school treat. Across the Elbe bridge I could see American and British troops standing around. As our lorry slowed to a standstill, and they heard my strange story, an avalanche of cigarettes and chocolate was tossed aboard. I must have had a pang of self-pity, because a large lump rose in my throat, and tears streamed down my face.

The hours that followed were spent in eating, especially, our English white bread. It tasted like light cake after five years on German black bread. Those hours were ecstasy . . . chatting, listening, learning about the outside world from which I had been shut off.

After a medical check-up, clean-up, and general feed-up—for I was down from twelve stones to seven—it was like a magic carpet ride home by air to Ford, Sussex, on July 1, 1945.

In a smart new uniform of the 'Swobs'—the nickname for my regiment, the South Wales Borderers—I made myself comfortable in the corner seat of a train bound for Ilfracombe where my family were now living and watched the lush green fields flash by.

Ilfracombe at last. . . . On the station I met people who thought they recognized a skinny shadow of someone they used to know; then, question after question; at last, at last, I was walking my way back home.

# HAPPY VALLEY

*by George Martin*

*(D.S.O., D.F.C. and Bar)*

WE IN Bomber Command called it 'Happy Valley', probably to stop ourselves thinking too seriously about the hundreds of RAF airmen who had failed to return from this Valley of Death.

Our heavy losses over the Ruhr valley proved that there were some real snipers among the German gunners who looked after the place, and some very lethal bats among the night birds who backed them up.

But we believed in our own survival as we took off in Lancaster K-for-King, on the night of November 2, 1544. We had got back safely from seven previous trips over Happy Valley, and saw no reason why our run of luck should end on this one.

Our squadron was 405 Pathfinders, of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Eight Group, Bomber Command, based at Gransden Lodge, Caxton Gibbet, Cambridgeshire.

There were seven of us in the crew. Flying Officer Harold ('Hal') Hannah, pilot; Sergeant Tedo Perini, air gunner; Sergeant Ron Catlin, flight engineer; Flight-Sergeant Jack Burns, wireless operator; and a mid-upper gunner named Barney.

Sharing the duties as navigator with me, Flight-Lieutenant George Albert Martin, was Flying Officer Jake Cope.

This night there was a bright moon, which we regarded

with no favour at all. Ninety minutes after take-off we could see the marker flares over our target—Düsseldorf.

Anti-aircraft shells began to jolt us as we flew into the defence belt. One exploded near us, and K-King began to dive. Jake and I only realized this when we suddenly became light in our seats, equipment floated up off the chart table, and we felt ourselves start to slip forward.

‘What goes on?’ yelled Tedo, the tail-gunner. The mid-upper gunner, Barney, shouted that we were going down in a right-hand spiral dive.

Struggling to keep my balance in the steeply-angled bomber, I unplugged the intercom, breaking contact with the others, and reached Hal, the pilot. He had fallen forward on to the control column, and was feebly flailing his arms.

A piece of shrapnel had slashed through the nose of the Lancaster and wounded Hal in the chest. Now the bomber was screeching earthwards, out of control, and not one of us left in the crew knew how to fly a plane. It was every airman’s nightmare, but it was happening to us.

Ron and I tried to sit him up and heave back the stick to level out from this power dive. But it was soon clear that Hal was badly wounded. He had to be hauled out of the pilot’s seat, so that someone could try to control the plane. Seconds flashed by. The plane twisted down, gathering speed. But we couldn’t move Hal.

Being off the intercom, I pulled Ron’s helmet away from his head, and yelled in his ear: ‘Get Hal out of here!’ meaning the pilot’s seat.

My idea was to move in and try to operate a control so as to lift our starboard wing and stop our turning motion, for I was fearing (among other things) a spin.

The rear-gunner must have thought I said: ‘Get the hell out of here,’ for he baled out.

I don’t blame him. Our antics felt pretty wild up at the wing. What they must have been like down at the tail end only God and a gunner could tell you.

At last we realized it wasn't possible to lift Hal out of the seat *and* pull out of the dive, so we let the plane go on screaming down and concentrated on pulling the wounded pilot out.

We tried to roll Hal's bulky eleven stone over the controls but his feet were wedged under the rudder bar.

We tugged him free at last, his 'chute harness catching on trim controls and flap controls, and on every little knob and lever.

Ron helped me to lower Hal to the cockpit floor, and I moved into the hot seat.

Now I was going solo for all our lives.

My experience as a pilot had been confined to a few hours in a Link trainer firmly fixed on the ground.

On practice flights, I'd had a few hours 'dual' flying with Hal, so I knew enough to realize I could not afford to take any liberties with the Lancaster.

But with the help of the crew, we might do something in the way of getting home, if the plane was in flying condition.

One thing was sure: if we didn't pull out of this dive we would all be parts of a wreck.

There seemed to be hundreds of dials in front of me. I didn't know where to find the compass, altimeter, airspeed indicator, or the artificial horizon.

I had so little idea of our position in the sky that I quite literally did not know which was 'up'.

When I thought I was looking *down* I saw the moon go sailing past my side window. When I looked *up* through the cockpit roof, I could see the target, apparently up in the sky.

But then Barney came over the intercom from his midships turret, to tell me that we were still spiralling down to starboard. It seemed a long time since we started that, too.

Among the mass of dials I found the artificial horizon. This dial, operated gyroscopically, has a line representing

the skyline, with a luminous head-on silhouette of a plane in miniature.

If the silhouette is dead centre and level, the pilot knows that the plane is steady and level.

But now the little plane was lying in the bottom right-hand quadrant of its dial—indicating that we were in a corkscrew right-hand dive, and in trouble.

I remember thinking: 'That's it—the gyros have toppled.' This meant that the only dial I knew even vaguely how to use was useless.

I tried to pull the wing up at the same time as pulling up the nose, but this didn't work. So I first got the wing up, which stopped the moon and target going *round* us, then started to haul the control column towards me.

The Lancaster, with full bomb load, and four engines at full throttle, was still roaring down at more than 300 mph.

Gritting my teeth, my head swimming as G-forces made the blood rush back, I tugged the control column harder.

Sweat streamed down my face as we began to level out, roughly straight, and under control.

We had dropped like a stone from 17,000 feet to 5,000 feet.

Entirely by good fortune, we were still over the target. It seemed a good idea to let the bombs go, and having found the right lever to open the bomb doors, we did so.

This relieved us of so much weight, and so altered our balance, that the aircraft began to shoot upwards and we soon reached 10,000 feet.

Also, things were staying in their proper place—the stars above, target fires below, airspeed normal. The engineer had been able to check his dials, and told us there was no serious damage.

The next problem: how could I turn the plane round? We had recovered from our aerobatic dive facing south-east. Home was in the opposite direction.

My first attempt was a shaky affair. We wondered if we were going to turn *over* instead of round, so I hastily put

everything back where it had been before, and had a quick re-think.

Life was made no simpler by the fact that the bomber would not fly straight and level. Either I was shoving the nose down to avoid a stall, or hauling it up to stop another sickening dive.

Then, the loveliest sight I shall ever see.

That blessed little plane silhouette in the artificial horizon was back on the job. The gyros had not tumbled.

It was no longer lying in the bottom right-hand corner in the 'dive' position. Now it was wavering up and down, wobbling from side to side, just as it did in the Link trainer, and just as we were doing in the sky.

Maybe the idea of flying that Lanc scared me nearly witless, but I *could* fly that little joker in the dial, and turn it left or right, so there was a chance of getting home.

Hal had been dragged back behind the main spar. He was semi-conscious, deathly pale, and obviously losing a lot of blood.

Could I get him back in time? Or back at all?

Having found a way of managing the big plane, by mastering the small one, we started flying roughly to courses, and Jake did some wizard work, assessing our probable position.

We were climbing and diving alternately, as though on a scenic railway, when Barney spotted a German night-fighter.

The pilot must have thought we could be left to destroy ourselves, for he sheered off.

Just as well, for I could not have done anything to avoid him if he had decided to attack, and had told Barney that he had better not miss.

Hal complained of the cold, in spite of being wrapped in all we could find to cover him, and despite a small shot of morphia.

Ron was tending the motors to ensure I didn't give them too much of a bending. Jake was really bringing clair-

voyance into the art of navigation, to off-set my weird flying.

We all agreed that there was no question of abandoning ship. The skipper was too hard hit to jump with a 'chute.

This meant that when, and if, we got home I had to somehow land this seventeen-ton monster. There was enough on hand to worry about. That problem could wait.

Time and miles passed. Our peculiar switchback movements seemed to fox the German ack-ack gunners.

As we pitched and bucked towards the English coast I wondered what was the best thing to do. It seemed that the best idea was for three to jump, leaving me to try landing, and Barney to get Hal out, if we got away with it.

'Nothing doing,' said all the boys, stoutly. 'No one is getting out before the show-down.'

I was grateful. It would need all our combined luck to get away with what we were facing.

Two years before, I had escaped from a bomber that had unexpectedly crashed on a Derbyshire hilltop at 140 mph, so I had some idea what we were up against.

I decided to go in 'wheels up', to cut the risk of bouncing up off the wheels, and stalling at 100 feet, or nosing over, or landing on one wheel and a wing-tip, all of which were well within the bounds of possibility, and very dangerous indeed.

If I could belly-land there was a fair chance of staying right side up.

Jake's efforts succeeded in bringing us over East Anglia. Now, as we lost height for the final gamble, tension in our plane really began to build up.

To find our own 'drome was beyond our skill. It involved too many turns which, at 5,000 feet or 6,000 feet were quite an adventure, but at 1,000 feet or less, suicidal.

We called up on 'May Day' wavelength (which means HELP! in a big way) to get the nearest 'drome that would accept the risk of letting us try to land there.

Shooting up from the darkness of an American-manned



airfield at Debden, Essex, came green Very lights. I was appalled at how small it looked, and at how much closer I had to get to the earth before even starting an approach, let alone actually touching down.

Unknown to us, Hal, our wounded pilot, must have been following our performance. A voice so weak that we didn't know whose it was, came over the intercom: 'Get Q.F.E. . . . barometric pressure.'

Of course, I hadn't thought of getting Q.F.E. to set our altimeter, and so get our correct height above the 'drome.

How Hal, in his condition, had managed to keep track of my aerobatics is beyond me. He was tough, as brave as they come. There wasn't a weak one in the lot of them.

Thank God he didn't know I could not find the altimeter among the maze of dials quickly enough for it to be of use to me at this stage. It might have been just too much of a worry for him.

Now we were roughly in position to make our approach. Ron set the motors and propellers to the speed and pitch for a glide—we hoped—to the runway.

We jettisoned the upper escape hatch, and the cockpit cover, to avoid having them jam on landing. The others took up their crash positions, heads between knees, around Hal, to steady him as we went in.

As we dropped, Jake thought (how unconscious can you get?) that he would see how we were doing on our approach, and stuck his head out of the escape hatch.

The sudden departure of his heli at 100 mph recalled him to his senses, and he took up position behind the main spar with the rest.

I was too busy to know how scared I was. I kept shooting glances at the little silhouette to see that the wings were level, and struggled to keep in line with the runway.

The Flying Control Officer below knew it was an amateur in the pilot's seat. I had made that plain over the radio-telephone. What he saw now, confirmed his fears.

But in a tired voice (or was it deliberately relaxed to

steady me?) he drawled, as if correcting a trainee pilot: 'You're a-w-a-y too high, K-King. Better go round again.'

I could just as easily have hit his control tower as missed, so his casualness was all the more admirable.

His advice was good. The trouble about taking it was that it involved a climb, a turn, a calculated run back past the 'drome, another turn, and then getting our bomber up to the point for another run in.

By this time I was getting beyond connected thought. I pulled up the nose without opening the throttles in an effort to climb, saw the airspeed falling to stalling point, and put the nose down to regain speed.

I saw the little silhouette wobble and concentrated on that, pulled the nose up again to climb, and felt that we must be getting awful close to landing.

My mind seemed in a fog of fear that after all this we might yet crash into a hill, or pitch up on a wing, skid on our belly or cartwheel in flames. And all I could see was the airspeed indicator and the artificial horizon.

Then I couldn't see, hear, or feel anything.

Blackness. I was out to the world.

Now I became aware of someone saying: 'Stop, you bastard. . . . Stop, you bastard,' while I was shoving with my feet on the rudder bar with all my might, as if slamming on a mammoth lorry's brakes, and hauling back the control column, trying to halt a team of runaway horses.

At last I realized that the character talking was me. We were down. It had come off.

The kite was sitting there, in a flying position. The underbelly, which had gouged a 300-yard furrow in a grass field, was a mass of bent, torn and strained metal.

I heard sizzling and crackling, as though K-King was bursting into flames, so I scrambled out through the cockpit-roof.

The rest of the crew had got out, and were bent over Hal by a hedge. How long had I been 'out'?

The 'drome we failed to land at (by about half a mile)

swiftly guessed where we'd got to, and an ambulance raced to us.

I wish I could say that Hal got better, and that we all went on to finish our tour of ops together. But even his strength and courage couldn't beat a piece of flak that went in at the top of his shoulder and down through his lung. He died in hospital.

Jake runs a bank now (and is run by his kids); Jack went back into steel work; Barney—I don't know what happened to Barney; Tedo came home from a POW camp and last I heard had a haulage business; and Ron went to Canada after the war.

It is more than fifteen years since we flew out of Happy Valley, but, even now, recalling it still gives me a syncopated heart-beat and shortens my breath.

# FOURTEEN DAYS ABSENT

*by James Braddock*

SHRILLY, the Jap guards screamed: 'Speedo! Speedo!'—faster, faster. And mingled with their yells came the sharp crack of their bamboo canes as they slashed at the arms, legs or heads of the prisoners.

The Nips were behind schedule with the railway they were driving their slaves to build through the thick Burmese jungle, the railway that cost more than 60,000 lives.

I, Sergeant James Braddock, of the 18th Reconnaissance Regiment, was one of those slaves, captured in the fall of Singapore.

Every day each batch of prisoners had a set task to do on the railroad before they were allowed to crawl painfully back to bed. I was in a batch which had to ballast the track in the wake of those who had hacked a way through the tangle of jungle.

Sometimes the ballast had to reach as high as three feet, and every single spadeful of earth had to be carried a dozen yards or more.

We had three meals a day—if you can call a handful of boiled rice and an occasional watery stew of dried vegetables a meal.

In fact even the Japs realized our rations were too meagre, and as a concession they ordered all prisoners who were too sick to work on the railroad to wander around in the jungle looking for extra food.

So each morning men with half-healed wounds, men with open sores, men with fever and dysentery stumbled out to catch 'game', and every night the camp was ringed with little fires, each with its circle of expectant hungry men sitting round watching the day's catch being stewed in a petrol drum.

Snakes, tree rats, slugs, lizards and hosts of quite unrecognizable creatures. Starvation stops you from being fussy, and everything we caught went into that witch-broth.

Why, you could almost have expected cannibalism in that camp, if there had been enough meat hanging on our bones to satisfy any self-respecting cannibal.

When I was taken prisoner in Singapore I weighed around eleven stone: now I was down to seven stone. My hip-bones stuck out alarmingly and you could have hung your hat on my shoulder-blades.

We were a frightful sight. All of us were stark naked except for little loincloths tied with tape (we called them 'Jap-happies') and Thai battle-bowlers, round helmets made of pressed paper. We looked like emaciated savages.

I looked worse than most: three of my front teeth had been smashed out with one blow of a bamboo staff when a Jap slashed me across the face.

But there were worse punishments than blows. There were tortures that made even beheading with a Japanese sword seem preferable. That I was to find out.

Every day as we marched from our billets to the railroad I had seen in a clearing a tiny hut built of bamboo. It stood there, a mysterious building about the size of a dog kennel, quite isolated, and the sun beating down on it.

I did not know its purpose, and I never bothered to inquire.

While we laboured and sweated in the steamy heat, flies buzzed thick around us. When we sat down to eat or

lay down to sleep, flies settled in big patches on us. They crawled horribly into our ears and nostrils; they clung around our lips.

Eventually, in a bid to get rid of the flies, the Japs worked out a 'spare-time occupation' for us. Each prisoner had to catch 300 flies a day and then set out his catch in groups of five for the officer to count when he came round on inspection.

If you were below your quota, you risked a blow with a bamboo cane. Some of the lads buried their day's catch in a hiding place, then later unearthed the best corpses for the next day's inspection.

At last one of the Australian prisoners devised an ingenious wire 'fly trap' which did so well that he could hang over his bed the sign 'Flies for Sale'. Trust a Digger!

Hunger gnawed at us. It became an agony. Thought of food grew into a crazy obsession. It was hunger that drove me to a deed so reckless that no sane man would ever have contemplated in such circumstances.

The Japs had been dynamiting the river for fish to stock their larder, and my crazy plan was to raid their cook-house.

I whispered the plan over with my Reccy pal, Sergeant Granville Lawrence, and an Australian chum, 'Digger' Brookes.

We planned a night raid. Each of us would make a pretence of going to the latrine and then team up for the assault.

About 2 a.m. that night I nudged Granville and whispered to him to be off. After about ten minutes I nudged 'Digger'.

Ten more minutes and I followed. The Jap guard at the end of the hut growled a question. I replied '*Benjo*', meaning latrine.

He motioned me on. I met the other two at the latrine and we crawled through the dark to the cookhouse. There were no guards there.

First thing we found was three buckets of fish. We emptied one into an empty rice sack and Granville sneaked off with it.

Next, 'Digger' and I tackled a heap of cucumbers and onions and some green vegetables that looked like lettuce. Off he went with a sack full.

Then I spied some big tins of coconut oil. I was testing one of these for weight when the door burst open and two Jap guards dashed in.

They came at me with the butt-ends of their rifles and felled me, then kicked me around and screamed at me. I was just about 'all in' when they stopped kicking and dragged me off to the guard-room.

There, to my surprise, the Guard Commander did not order me to be beaten up again. He ordered me to stand to attention outside the guard-room door.

There I stayed swaying on my feet until morning, and when daylight came I thought my punishment was over and that I would be dismissed to my hut. But two guards fell in beside me and motioned me to get marching.

They marched me to the clearing, right up to the little bamboo hut. There were no windows in it: I couldn't even see an entrance in it until one of the guards bent down and lifted up a tiny portion of its wall.

They forced me to my knees, and with a few kicks made it plain what I had to do: crawl in. The opening was so small that I could only just struggle into the hut.

Whoever had made that kennel had done a good job—or a diabolical one. Although built entirely of bamboo it allowed not the slightest glimmer of light inside: I have never known such total blackness.

Aching and exhausted, I tried to flop down. Then I found what a devilish contraption the hut was.

I could neither lie down nor stand up: I could only sit. The actual measurements I found out later: they were 4 ft. 6 in. by 4 ft. 6 in., and 5 ft high.

But I pulled my knees up, bent down my head and

actually fell asleep. I don't know how long I slept. I woke up feeling cramped, hungry and thirsty.

I wondered how my pals had fared. If they had got safely away, there would be a good feed in the hut. It was a consolation to think some good had come of our mad exploit.

Like most other prisoners I had suffered dysentery for some time, but mildly. It was troubling me now.

I knocked on the side of my prison and tried to shout. My cries were only a hoarse croak in my dried-up throat.

I kept this up for some time and at last the trap-door opened and a guard peeped in.

'Benjo,' I said. The Jap pointed to the corner of the hut. I croaked '*Joto nai*' (no good), but he slammed the trap-door and bolted it again.

There was nothing else for it. I made a mental note to use the same corner always, but the thought of the condition the hut would be in soon made me shiver. Already the flies were coming, buzzing about filthily.

At last the door was unfastened again. In the blinding light outside I could see two pairs of legs—those of a Jap and those of one of our lads.

An English voice shouted: 'Stick it, Jim, we're with you.' Then I heard the crunch of the Jap's fist on the lad's mouth.

A plate of plain rice was shoved into the hut. I grabbed it as the trap-door slapped closed and pushed a handful into my mouth. God Almighty! The stuff was saturated with salt. I spat it out, and kicked the plate away.

I exhausted myself in a torrent of hysterical cursing, drifted into sleep and dreamed.

I dreamed of drinking—innumerable pints of ice-cold beer, pint after pint, my thirst insatiable, unsatisfied. I was swimming in a long bath that stretched away into the distance. Swallowing huge mouthfuls of the cool green water, bounding through it with huge powerful strokes, glorying in the feel of it on my burning skin. Then



I was fishing, pulling huge fish out of the river, and as I unhooked them I noticed, entirely without surprise, that each fish had the slant-eyed face of a Jap.

I went on a pub crawl. I slipped into my local, the Bulldog. 'A pint of bitter, Jack,' I called. 'Fill me another, quick.' The landlord was pulling pint after pint and placing them on to the bar counter. I could see them all lined up, the amber liquid sparkling under the light. People were crowding into the bar. I heard them whispering: 'He's from the hut. Fill him another. I'll pay for that one.'

As soon as I finished one pint, the whole line moved up one. I worked feverishly, emptying glass after glass, but still I was thirsty. The pint glasses were stretched all along the length of the bar, and into infinity. Now I was in All Saints Church explaining to a Jap guard why I was drinking the Holy Water. They marched me off, and flung me into a well. I made a huge and beautiful splash. I drank all the water, and when it was all gone, I was thirsty.

I was in a Jap court of law. Everyone had long, long faces and kept growing longer.

Whispers of 'Terrible! Scandalous! He drank the Most Holy Water that should have baptized the Emperor. To the hut with him, to the hut.'

I broke free and fled. I wanted my little hut. I looked everywhere. I could hear my pursuers thundering through the jungle after me. I kept stumbling—I couldn't make any headway. I stumbled again, and woke up. I was bathed in sweat, trembling. What a relief it was only a dream!

Already, it seemed, I was going round the bend.

My tongue felt like sand-paper. Even when I coaxed some saliva into my mouth the action of swallowing was almost impossible and painful.

The trap-door opened again. Two more pairs of legs. I knelt down and peeped out. The prisoner's legs were

nearest to me and, dangling down 'as low as his calves, was a water-bottle.

When I grabbed the bottle came away easily, and I hurriedly hid it as the Jap came nearer and a bowl of rice was thrust in to me.

I cowered in the corner with the bottle to my lips. 'God bless you, fellow,' I thought. 'God bless you whoever you are.' The water was warm, but that didn't worry me. I couldn't gulp it quickly enough.

I scooped a few grains of rice from the bowl and tasted them, tentatively. They were sweet; wonderfully sweet. That I knew was the work of our lads working in the cookhouse.

Greedily, I gobbled the lot. Then my stomach started feeling queasy. It got worse, and at last, in one violent retch, the whole lot came up, rice and water.

It served me right. I should have only sipped the water and eaten the rice more slowly.

I knew those rules. But up to now I had only read about such a situation. How hellishly different it is when one is actually in it.

The stench in the hut had ceased to nauseate me. Even the flies that swarmed in didn't worry me. I stopped slapping out at them; I let them settle and crawl stickily over me.

But the heat seemed beyond enduring. Every time when I dozed off, I awoke sweating. I shivered, not with cold but with fever.

Now it was difficult to move about. I had bouts of cramp in every part of my body, even in my tongue.

I was dreaming again. I dreamed I was home. At least I've been told I was dreaming. But I believe my spirit wandered home: it all seemed much more real than any dream.

I decided to go home and, without conscious of any effort, I was there. My wife was peeling potatoes, and baby Sheila was playing on the rug.

Doreen and Bert, my other children, were at school, and—just with a glance—I saw them clearly in their classrooms.

I tried to touch my wife. I shouted: 'Peg! Peg! It's me . . . Jim!' I followed her into the kitchen. But I couldn't make her know I was there.

When I came back to the hut—or, as you would say, when I woke up—I faced the intolerable thirst again. I could feel my ribs now; my knees seemed sharp and pointed.

But what was worse was the feel of my skin. It seemed to be coated with some slimy substance, cold and heavy. This was, I felt sure, the 'death sweat'.

So it went on—day after day, night after night. Though I had no sense of what was day or what was night, except when the trap-door opened and sunlight hit my face.

At first that sunlight seemed to stab my eyes: later I could see only a dim glow. At last I could not tell whether it was daylight or not: I just groped for my bowl of rice.

And then I was beyond pain or thirst. A feeling of lassitude, not unpleasant, drenched me. I was floating on a cloud. Time passed unnoticed.

I heard someone shout—very far away: 'Hey, Doctor, Doctor, come quickly.'

'Someone needs a doctor in a hurry,' I thought dreamily.

I felt something warm and sweet in my mouth. I felt hands on my body, kind hands. I heard voices, English voices.

'He's okay at last. He's out of it.'

I tried to sit up, but hands pressed me back. 'Take it easy, lad.'

Only then did I realize that the Japs had released me from the hut.

I was in the sick bay, and I was blind. But I was among friends again.

It was two weeks before I could see their faces, even dimly. Even to this day I cannot bear bright light.

I heard the full story of all my comrades had tried to do for me. How my officers had been beaten up for protesting to the Camp Commandant: how the lads had tried to smuggle food and water to me and been thrashed.

I hadn't been forgotten: I had been with them all the time.

'How long was I in the hut, Doctor?' I asked.

He grinned. 'You were just fourteen days "absent",' he said.

# SAVED—BY A CAT

*by Charles Random*

FUNNY thing about ships' cats. They always seem to know when a ship is about to leave port, and manage to scramble aboard with seconds to spare. A seaman will miss a ship, but not a cat.

Fluffy, our tortoiseshell pet on the 19,000-ton liner *Windsor Castle*, would come bounding along the quayside at the last minute and leap aboard.

Once at sea, she rarely wanted to sit on deck and see the sights, even the gorgeous blue of the Mediterranean. She stayed below, within sniffing distance of the galley, purring with well-fed contentment.

Fluffy was getting more than her ration of attention on one voyage. Crammed aboard were 3,000 soldiers and airmen bound for North Africa, and it is a wonder that her fur was not stroked away.

In Convoy KMF 11, sailing from Glasgow, we'd had a quiet trip. The arrowhead formation of our destroyer escort ahead gave us confidence that any threat from whatever quarter would be swiftly dealt with.

It was the night of March 22, 1943, and there was barely 100 miles to go through dangerous waters to reach the safety of Algiers harbour.

As ship's fireman I had finished my watch at midnight, and was taking a quiet stroll on deck, drinking in the soft night air. Away in the darkness on the port side were bases

from which German and Italian planes had been striking at our convoys. Somewhere down below, probably not too far from the galley, Fluffy lay curled up, sleeping off the last meal, or waiting for the next.

Suddenly, a line of enemy torpedo bombers, flying just above the waves, wheeled in towards us. Ships' sirens screamed out in the night, and the convoy zigzagged in a frantic effort to escape.

A torpedo crashed into our port side, right on the water-line, and directly into the engine-room.

The *Windsor Castle* heaved, shuddered, and listed to port as tons of sea-water poured into the gaping hole in her side.

The ship's crew, and the soldiers and airmen aboard, rushed from their cabins and troop decks, most of them undressed.

In the rush and excitement of getting away from the stricken ship no one thought of Fluffy. I heard my mate reeling off some choice language. He was trying to put his trousers on upside down, and money from his pocket spilled over the cabin deck.

The generators providing the electricity were soon under water, and the ship was plunged into darkness.

Guns from the other ships in the convoy, as well as from our sinking ship, blazed away at the enemy raiders. By the light of 'flaming onions' streaking through the air, we hurried to the boat-decks.

By the time I reached the deck, our doomed ship was settling down by the stern, heeling over to port.

The crew's first job in an emergency like this is to try to get the troops off as safely and quickly as possible. We helped the soldiers and airmen scramble away in the lifeboats, then tossed rafts overboard.

There were no lifeboats left for the ship's crew, so we jumped into the sea and clung to the rafts, floating all round the liner.

The rest of the convoy had steamed full speed ahead.

There was just a chance that U-boats might have been lying in wait, as well as other torpedo bombers.

Two destroyers peeled off from the escort, picked up the surviving troops, and hurried them off to dry land at Algiers.

We, about 300 of the crew left behind, floated about the Mediterranean on rafts, or in lifeboats, which were now empty.

At dawn we were amazed to see the grey-painted liner still afloat. We thought that with a hole so large in her side she would have gone to the bottom in minutes.

At ten o'clock, when the destroyers came back for us, the old *Windsor Castle* still stayed gamely afloat.

Packed aboard the warships, drying our clothes, and drinking cups of hot tea, we watched her drift aimlessly, and thought of all the personal treasures that still lay aboard.

On the destroyer which picked me up was the Captain of the *Windsor Castle*. We stood in silence and listened to him.

'There's just a chance that we might be able to salvage her,' he said. 'I want eight volunteers to go back with me.'

I stepped forward, and within minutes we were rowing back to the sinking troopship.

Among the volunteers were a deck officer, the Chief Engineer, Second Engineer, two seamen, and three of our 'down below' gang. As we drew near the stricken troopship, we could see that her rails at the stern were under water, and a good deal of the bows were showing as she heeled over, crazily.

We climbed up a swinging rope ladder to the boat-deck, and the Captain held a quick consultation on the bridge.

Torch in hand, for there was inky blackness below, I began to descend to the engine-room. I don't know what made me go ahead. I guess it was sheer curiosity. The kind of curiosity that kills a cat.

But our ship's cat, Fluffy, was far from my mind as I picked my way down the companionways to the engine-room.

There was an eerie silence in the bowels of the ship, except for the faint lapping of water. I shone my torch from the top of the steps leading to the engine-room, and at once realized the hopelessness of the situation.

The whole of the engine-room was flooded, from the top of the iron staircase to the control platform at the bottom.

From above I heard the urgent shout: 'Get the hell off the ship. She's going down fast!' At that moment the ship lurched violently.

Unbalanced, I slid towards the engine-room rails. My head crashed against something hard, and I fell, dazed. The torch rolled from my hand into the flood-water. I lay there, stunned, in total darkness.

In a nightmare of semi-consciousness, I was aware of groaning timbers, and the swishing, sucking of water as the huge ship was being drawn to the sea-bottom.

The others, not knowing that I was trapped below, and believing that I would follow, had quickly made for the ship's boat, tied alongside.

As I lay there, waiting for the end, I heard the faint mewling of a cat. Out of the darkness I could see two green eyes aglow.

Fluffy! We had forgotten our own ship's cat! I groped my way on hands and knees towards her. At least I would have a faithful companion to die with me.

My head ached and swam as I scrambled in the direction of the cat's eyes. I became aware that I was crawling along the working alleyway.

As I reached her, Fluffy nudged her cold nose against my face, and brushed the whole length of her purring sleek coat against me. It was as though she was trying to say something.

I glanced up and saw a glimmer of daylight. It was



coming through a slit in the black-out curtains on the well-deck. Had Fluffy found a way out for me?

In a flash I grabbed the cat, burst through the window, and rushed over to the rails. I could see the rest in the lifeboat, well away from the ship, expecting her to sink at any moment. There was nothing else for it. I had to jump.

I leaped with Fluffy tucked tightly under my left arm. She was panic-stricken, clawing and scratching me. I could feel her little heart hammering faster. Striking out with my right arm, I made for the lifeboat. Fluffy was still tucked tightly under my left arm. I must have been squeezing her to death.

I managed to tread water, and hold on to her until the lifeboat drew up and hauled us both in . . . a rather scared ship's fireman, and a bedraggled, pathetic bundle of wet fur.

We were 100 yards away when, two minutes later, the *Windsor Castle* went gurgling to the bottom.

Back at the destroyer, Fluffy, the cat that saved my life, was adopted by the crew. As for me, I've had a soft spot for cats ever since.

# THE NIGHT I NEARLY DIED

*by Harry Wright, G.M.*

THOSE of us who lived in large cities during the war grew accustomed to the high explosives, the oil bombs, delayed-action bombs, and incendiaries that the Germans threw at us, nightly.

But how I cursed Adolf Hitler and his latest terror weapon—the flying-bomb—in the early hours of July 29, 1944.

I was police sergeant 64G, and had just taken over from the station officer at Shepherdess Walk, off City Road, London, after a day of non-stop bombardment by the vicious buzz-bombs, launched from sites on the French coast.

We hard-pressed police thought we'd deserved a well-earned breather and a cup of char. But at 1 a.m., as blitz-weary Londoners snatched some sleep in their shelters, a roaring buzz-bomb, spurting flame, suddenly nose-dived.

The police station shook. Choking dust flew everywhere. I thought we'd had a direct hit.

Grabbing my tin-hat and torch, I rushed into the street. The flying-bomb had plunged into Moorfields Eye Hospital, 100 yards down the road.

As I ran along the deserted street to the scene, I was joined by a War Reserve constable, Archie Sexton, a former boxing champion.

My blood chilled when I saw the mess. Overhead a fire was raging. Part of the hospital had collapsed, and more was ready to fall.

The bomb had hit the west end of the hospital, knocking down a block which contained patients undergoing eye treatment.

Beneath the building was a large air-raid shelter, which from thirty to fifty people used every night. It was partly blocked by debris. Someone was screaming.

Telling Archie to keep his eye open for a rescue party, I scaled the railings surrounding the basement, and dropped to the area below.

Stumbling over bricks and rubble, I found a way into the shelter. It was one long tunnel, with a maze of other tunnels leading off, designed to help survivors escape from a number of emergency exits.

Archie had followed me. I told him to go back, but he replied: 'We're in this together, mate. Save your breath.'

Pausing in the darkness to listen for voices, we could hear the roar of flames above.

'Anyone about?' We shouted several times, but our voices echoed back.

With the dim beams from our blacked-out torches we explored the alcoves of the shelter which led off from the main tunnel.

Shouting, listening, peering into the blackness, we could find no suggestion that anyone had been there. It was uncanny.

Just as we decided they had all escaped, and that we should give up the search, we heard voices. They came from behind a door which had jammed. We heaved, and soon we had released two men and a woman.

The woman was a sad-faced, slight Cockney. One of the men was shortish, stocky, and the other, a fallow-skinned youngster. From them we learned that others had been in the shelter. So we all joined in the search.

To our dismay the emergency exits were blocked by

falling brickwork. We turned round, and made our way back to the entrance.

We drew back, and clung together as everything around us shook and trembled. An avalanche of bricks and masonry collapsed and crushed in our path.

As the dust settled we looked at each other. Miraculously, we were unhurt. But there our luck ended.

Our only way to safety was blocked by debris and fire.

The roar of the spreading fire above could be heard more clearly now. In the eerie light from the flames we could see that our portion of the shelter was still secure.

From the base of a lift-shaft it was possible to look up into the heart of the fire. Part of the metal framework had begun to melt, and tiny blobs of molten ironwork fell with a hiss at our feet.

Looking down, I saw that water was beginning to swirl round our ankles. For a moment we thought a water main had burst.

But a quick glance showed us that the water was seeping in from all directions, not gushing as it would from a burst main.

Somehow, though, this silent threat was more frightening than a rush of water. It brought with it an air of finality and hopelessness . . . fire creeping down from above, and water rising beneath our feet.

Normally, I can hide my feelings. But one of the party must have detected my troubled thoughts. 'We've had it, ain't we, Guv?' he said.

I thought of the debris-littered road above, swarming with firemen, police, rescue workers, ambulances and fire engines.

Looking him straight in the eye, I replied: 'They know we are here. They'll try to get us out. It is now a matter of time—and luck. We can do nothing but wait.'

The young man lost his head. He began to scream: 'I don't want to die. . . . I don't want to die,' and rushed about frantically, trying to find a way out.

Archie and I tried to pacify him and reassure him. A slap round the face seemed to quell his spasm of hysteria. He sank to his knees in the rising water, and sobbed quietly: 'Oh, God. I don't want to die.'

Our own inward panic had now been replaced with despair, an acceptance of certain death.

I looked round at the others. The sallow-skinned young man had quietened down and found new strength.

The stocky man and the slight woman—two ordinary members of the public I had the honour to serve—were consoling each other.

And there was Archie, the tough, chunky ex-pug, gentle, patient, and understanding to those sharing his plight.

It needs someone cleverer than I to describe the courage and greatness of spirit which showed in their faces. They knew how to die.

By now the heat from the fire above was intense. Small pieces of debris were falling. The building around us sighed and creaked like a ship in a gale.

The water was two feet deep, and rising. Breathing, in the hot, smoke-laden air, was difficult.

Telling the others to stay put, I waded around, exploring every passage to find a way out. But every path ended in a pile of impassable rubble or fire.

On the way back to the group I had to splash through three feet of water. A ripple must have reached a fuse-box.

Suddenly, it blew up in my face. I stumbled forward, my eyes burning, everything around me black. It was Archie who led me, gently, back to the shallow water.

Gradually, my eyesight came back. The pain in them was as nothing compared with the relief of knowing I was not going to die in total darkness.

Choking and coughing, with efforts to breathe the hot air, we were all in a bad way.

It was the little Cockney woman who said: 'It won't be long now, so let's say goodbye.' Solemnly, we all shook

hands, secretly hoping that there was still a chance of life.

The stocky man said: 'I wouldn't mind if we could die *doing* something, instead of just waiting to drown or roast.'

I suggested we all got under the water as much as possible. It was quite warm, and we found considerable relief by kneeling in it, and breathing just above water level.

How long we remained there I do not know. I cannot remember what I thought. They were not noble thoughts.

The prospect of dying, trapped like a rat, and being unable to take any of the enemy with me, filled me with frustration.

Everything seemed negative. A waste of time, energy and effort.

I thought of my wife and two dear daughters, and prayed for them. At no time can I remember praying for deliverance. Somehow it seemed too late.

Waiting to die seemed endless. The flames beat downwards. The water was warm, but we realized that it had been at the same level for some time.

There was a flicker of hope as Archie tried once more to find a way out, but it died as he waded back, grimly shaking his head.

Every time a face was raised above the water, scorching air forced it down again. How Archie had made his effort I did not know. It had taken all his strength, and he was now in a bad way. So we waited in silence for the last breath.

At once my heart leapt. I thought I detected a slight, almost imperceptible movement of air over the surface of the water.

With renewed hope I followed the direction of the flow.

Not wishing to raise false hopes I merely said: 'I'm going to have another look at things.'

Wading along a passage-way I found the atmosphere distinctly cooler. At the end, I found the fire had almost

burned itself out, leaving room to crawl through the debris.

Dislodging some bricks, I made my way through, and found myself in the basement area near the spot where we had gone in.

Looking up the side of the hospital, I could see the fire was still raging fiercely.

Wayward sprays of water from the hoses of unseen firemen swept along the side of the hospital. It was these jets which had killed the fire blocking the entrance, and swollen the flood-water in our shelter.

A piece of burning timber fell in a cloud of sparks beside me. Stepping back, I stumbled, and sat unceremoniously in the rubble.

Hoarsely, I shouted to the others that we were free, and scrambled back to help lead them to safety.

We leaned there, drinking in the cool night air, dodging falling, blazing timber.

We were all too weak to climb out of the deep area up to the road. Being the tallest, six feet one inch, I stood on Archie's back and grasped the railings.

I nearly fell back as I grabbed them. They were hot enough to burn the skin from my hands. But I had to get over. I landed in a sprawling heap among rubble where there was once pavement.

Flames from the hospital lit up the street as I staggered to a fireman, yelling that people were trapped.

He looked at my tattered, partly burnt police uniform, covered with brick dust, saturated to the chest, and gasped: 'Impossible—nothing could live down there.'

With the help of another rescue worker I found a ladder and hurried back to the basement. But my four companions had gone.

Only after I had climbed down and searched the shelter was I told that a rescue team had spotted them and led them to safety.

I learned, too, that the people we were looking for

when we became trapped had all left by an emergency exit before it was blocked by a fall of rubble. But seven patients had been killed by the flying-bomb.

I must have been light-headed, because my memory after that is just a blur of cheers, back-slaps, shining, kindly faces, a tot of whisky, a warm blanket round my shoulders, the soothing drip, drip of solution to keep the bandages moist round my face, hands and forearms, and the nurses, God bless them, telling Archie and me to stop talking, as it was so late.

Then, a shock. We froze at the sound of another buzz-bomb. It was coming nearer. Had I escaped a slow death for a quick one?

The engine cut. The buzz-bomb whistled down. Blast blew the windows out, and smashed the black-out screens. But it had missed us.

I was holding a nurse's hand as I fell into a deep, deep sleep.

Only three hours had elapsed since I had been called out, but the night I nearly died seemed to last a lifetime.



# THE TICKING WATCH

*by Roy Finch*

THIS is a personal account of an incident on the 12th - 13th April 1945, at Barnstedt, Germany, during the crossing of the river Aller, by units of the 53rd Welsh Division. It concerns particularly 'C' Company, 4th Battalion Welch Regiment.

I must have passed out.

When I came round, 'Chad' was kneeling beside me, cutting away the leg of my trousers. 'Chad', Lance Corporal Hannah, was in charge of 'C' Company's stretcher bearers. I never thought that I should need his services. I knew he had done a wonderful job with our wounded. Now, when I needed him he was there.

He needn't have been there at all. Memory flooded back. I was at least 400 yards forward of our position. On my left a house was burning fiercely; twenty yards to my right was a raised road; on the far side of that road was a Spandau, and the Jerry behind that gun sure knew how to use it. I should know, for he had just put a burst through my right leg. He knew his stuff with grenades, too. The last one he threw landed under my nose, smoking. I managed to push it to arm's length before it exploded, taking my fingers with it.

'For Christ's sake, get out of it before he throws more grenades,' I growled. 'That is an order.'

'Sorry, Sar'nt-Major,' 'Chad' said. 'I must get that leg into a splint.'

Then I looked at my leg. My foot was facing the wrong way.

'He will never get that straight,' I thought. How he did it I shall never know, because I passed out again. When I came round the next time, I was alone.

I had been alone before he came; I felt more alone than ever now. I tried to recall what had happened. I had to take my mind off the present. I dare not think of the future, and only the immediate past seemed important.

Now it all came back. I had lost my temper. That was over CSM Merriman. Yesterday morning he lost his way in 'B' Company's jeep, and drove straight into the German lines. We thought he had been taken prisoner. When we commenced our attack this morning, we found him beside his jeep. He was dead. That was when I saw red. He was my friend. We had been in this campaign together for months. Most of the original battalion was gone, dead or wounded. Those that were left became very close to each other. Merriman and I had been close; now he was dead beside his jeep, and the company commander wouldn't let me go near him. 'He may be mined,' he warned.

Yesterday seemed very remote now. What else did I remember about yesterday? Of course, there was that Captain Leutnant of the German Marine Corps. He certainly had guts. We were riding on a Sherman tank, when this cheeky sod jumped out of a slit-trench and threw a grenade at us. It bounced off. I got his watch, a good one, an Omega, engraved with his name. He had stood rigidly to attention when I took it, and said: 'You are not an English "shentleman".' Maybe he was right, but I could never forget my relatives and friends in the German-occupied Channel Islands.

My God; that watch. I still had that watch in my pocket, and now I was lying helpless twenty yards away from a

section of his fellow marines, perhaps his own company. What if they took me prisoner?

They are getting desperate. Only a few days ago they had shot a dozen prisoners from our 5th Battalion.

That watch! I can't get rid of it. It is in the right hand trouser pocket, and my right hand is just a bloody mess.

I was sure I could hear the damn thing ticking. 'Loot, loot, loot, loot,' it went. I could see the great, great notices, plastered in every town from Bayeux to Bocholt: LOOTERS WILL BE SHOT. Did the Germans shoot looters? I guessed that they did, especially the ones that looted watches from gallant German officers.

Then I remembered the German prisoner we had taken. Poor little sod, he was lost and frightened, and he had wandered into our lines in the dark. I was frightened in the dark, too. When he saw our Divisional flashes he had cowered away from us, calling us Monty's Murderers. Now I wondered if the Germans really thought of us like that, and why.

Certainly we had been continuously in action. They said that the war had slowed down in October. It didn't slow down for us. From Hertogenbosch, down to Limbourg, and the passage of the water obstacles to the Maas. One wet slit-trench after another; waking up every morning with our backsides in water. Then down into the Ardennes, for a cold Christmas and a bloody new year. Then twenty-eight days of muddy hell in the Reichwald Forest, and on across the Rhine, then the chase up to the Aller, which is where we came in.

I wonder how long I have been lying here? I don't feel any pain. Even my shattered leg doesn't hurt, except for that damned watch which seems to be beating a tattoo on my thigh.

What had happened to the battle? When I got hit, the others pulled out and left me. First of all I cursed them for leaving me, then I remembered that it was my own fault that we were there at all. I shouldn't have been there my-

self. I should have been with company headquarters, only I went to see what was holding up 15 Platoon.

It was then I saw the tank. It was a Sherman; he was supposed to be moving up the road with 15 Platoon, only his turret was a twisted mess where he had been hit by a panzerfist. The tank commander had baled out. He was screaming for smoke. His driver was still in the tank, blind.

Then I thought of Merriman again and I really saw red. I got 15 Platoon's mortar to put down smoke; then we got the blinded driver out of the tank. We found a poor devil of a Jerry too, with a great hole in his guts. I guess 'Chad' must have fixed them up too.

Then I made the platoon follow me along our side of the road until I thought we were level with the German position. When I tried to get them over the road, the Spandau had burped at me, and then they ran away and left me. Poor kids, I suppose the oldest of them was only nineteen.

It was then that I realized I was alone with a battle going on all round me. I panicked. I started screaming for the stretcher bearers. They didn't hear me. How could they, over 400 yards away? I think it gave me some comfort to shout for them, because that was when I first passed out, and 'Chad' Hannah found me.

A puff of white smoke suddenly spurted a few yards to my left, then one behind me; another and another. Three-inch mortar smoke, our own, too. 'I'm here! I'm here!' I screamed, and then I heard the tanks. The bloody fools, I thought. Don't they know I'm out here? Then my heart sank. I heard the tanks again, throbbing in the distance, but in the wrong direction.

I could hear them clearly now, above the noise of the mortar bombs. They could only be Jerries coming from the north. Suddenly, I know that they will find me, and run me down. Perhaps they may take me prisoner.

Oh God! Can't you stop that watch ticking? It's getting louder and louder, clear above the noise of the battle. It will lead them to me, and then . . . 'kaput'.

'Chad' had taken off my small pack, and put it under my head for a pillow. It had no comfort for me now. I could almost see its contents. There should have been spare socks, and other small kit, but in fact there was a half gross of fountain pens and a travelling clock, looted from the home of an SS Commandant.

I heard the tanks rumble nearer; they sounded like Tigers. Small arms seemed to have opened fire from all directions, and the mortars were putting down HE as well as smoke. What irony if I should be blown to bits by our own mortars. Perhaps that would be better than to be taken prisoner, with that damned watch ticking out a death knell.

I still felt no pain, but I was frozen with terror and with loss of blood. If only I could stop the demoniac ticking of that watch.

Now it had built up into a crescendo that blotted out the roar of the tank motors. The rumbling faded, the Spandaus stopped their chattering, and I could hear the slower staccato of the Brens, coming nearer.

More houses were burning, and the undergrowth near me was alight. I could feel the heat, and black smoke drifting over me. I was sick. I had seen men brewed up in a tank, and I would never forget the stink of burning flesh. Had I survived the Spandaus and the mortars only to be burned to death? I was sick again.

I could hear shouting from the direction of the burning houses, and then I saw a tin hat, a round one, an English one. Then another and another, then there were men beckoning me. I tried to crawl towards them, then the pain came, excruciating pain, and darkness, and as I sank down into the blackness I knew that the watch had stopped.

Someone was pouring water on my face. I came round for the third time, and there were Len and Taffy. Good old Len Williams, once my platoon sergeant. I could have kissed his ugly mug. I think I cried. They had a stretcher made from two rifles and a leather jerkin. They lifted me on to it.

I didn't mind the pain now. I was with friends, and soon

I would be home. The war was over for me. 'Chad' Hannah? He was given the Military Medal, and is now the Battalion Bandmaster.

Len Williams? We still meet once a year.

The watch? I have it to this day, but it has never ticked again.

# THE CHASE

*by John Percival*

AT A time when contests between two nations at war were anything but fair, I duelled with a German officer in a fair contest—and won.

It happened on a cold night in the Western Desert, not far from the battleground of El Alamein.

I was a military policeman with the famed 'Desert Rats'—the Seventh Armoured Division. We were known as 'Red-caps', but weren't wearing them at that time, for they were too easily spotted from the air.

After the break-through at El Alamein, our Brigade took up the role of trying to head off the retreating columns of the Afrika Korps. Three other lance-corporals of the Corps of Military Police took part with me in these 'left hooks', travelling in our 10 cwt truck with Battle HQ.

I cannot remember the exact date, for the simple reason that days, weeks, and even months had begun to mean little to those who had been 'out in the blue' longer than they cared to remember.

But it was early in 1943 that a patrol of the 11th Hussars brought a German prisoner to our camp one afternoon.

He was a tall, athletic-looking, sun-bronzed and blond officer of about twenty-eight or twenty-nine. With an NCO, he had been hunting gazelle in no-man's land in a staff car, when the Hussars had holed his petrol-tank and taken him prisoner. His NCO was either killed or escaped.

It was no part of a 'military policeman's normal duties to keep guard on prisoners, but on those occasions where only one or two prisoners were involved, we obliged. If we had not volunteered, the duty would have fallen on other HQ staff, who were as ill-prepared for the job as we were, manpower being stretched to the utmost.

As daylight faded, all vehicles of Battle HQ which, during the day, had been dispersed over the desert, began to assemble for the night into three adjacent columns, soft-skinned vehicles in the middle, and armoured cars and tanks at the head and flanks. Our provost truck was somewhere about the middle of the centre column.

Each lance-corporal surrendered a blanket to make a bed for the prisoner, and bed spaces were duly prepared by kicking aside the larger stones, and placing bed-rolls down by the side of our truck.

After being invited to dine with our officers, the tall German was handed over to us for safe keeping in the night. Drawing on lots, I drew the second trick for guard duty.

Before finally settling down for the night, we sat and yarned awhile. The German, who spoke excellent English, joined in.

He told us that he was a tutor at Heidelberg University, and that he had not long been married.

'How long will it be,' he asked, 'before my wife knows that I am a prisoner?' Over and over again, he quizzed me, and I did my best to assure him that it would not be long.

It was a dark, moonless night, and intensely cold, as he crawled into the blankets we had lent him, and appeared to drop off to sleep.

I relieved the first guard, and sat on a five-gallon petrol tin, facing the sleeping men who lay alongside our truck and on each side of the prisoner.

Feeling chilly, I put on my greatcoat over my battle-dress. All of us slept in our clothes, prepared for emergencies. For comfort's sake, I shoved my .38 pistol into



the greatcoat pocket, instead of putting on belt and holster.

The laager was as quiet as the grave in those early hours, and almost as dark. I heard something stir. It was the German officer, pulling the blankets up to his chin, as though feeling the cold.

But he must have been shaking his feet free from them. For, suddenly, he leaped to his feet, flung off the blanket jumped over the M.P. sleeping beside him, and ran round the radiator of the truck.

It happened in a flash. I yelled to my comrades, and sprinted after him. He was darting, just like the gazelles he had been hunting, at top speed into the night.

Through the off-side column of vehicles he fled, streaking off in a general northerly direction. I followed in hot pursuit.

After the initial burst, we settled down to a steady pace. He was about ten yards ahead of me and, try as I might, I could get no nearer to him. Every time he heard me puffing, piling on the pace, he put on an extra spurt.

He stepped out with long strides, like a great olympic runner, and I was having difficulty hanging on. So I decided to shed my greatcoat, for extra speed.

Off it came as I ran. But I had forgotten that inside the pocket was my only weapon—the pistol.

After about a mile or so, my cap fell off. My battledress blouse was hampering me, so I tore that off, too, and flung it to the wind.

We jogged on, and I seemed to be gaining on him slightly. All this time, he had been just a shadow in front of me, plugging on and on. But now I could see his outline more distinctly.

Although I was unarmed, I shouted to the fugitive: 'I'll shoot if you don't stop!'

Either he did not hear me, or doubted my ability to shoot straight while on the run, for he kept going.

I was a fairly good distance runner at the time, having kept myself fit by running five miles each evening back

home at Hexham, Northumberland. I was an amateur boxer too, so I felt confident that I had the measure of this German.

He had a slight advantage though, because he wore canvas-topped lightweight boots of the Afrika Korps. Mine were the heavy, hobnailed type.

After about two miles at blustering pace, I thought of the little matter of my .38 now lying somewhere on the deck. Questions were going to be asked about that.

I gritted my teeth and plodded on, saying to myself: 'He must not get away.'

Desperation seemed to be lending wings to the German's feet; but the thought of a court martial if I lost him, equally inspired me.

After about twenty minutes, I was beginning to despair. My heart and lungs were bursting. I cursed the breath I had wasted, shouting after him. The German was still charging at full speed into the darkness.

But then I noticed that he was not so sure-footed, and began to stumble. His long, raking strides were slowing into plodding last-gasp effort.

It could only have been slightly more than three miles—but it seemed like thirty—when I was almost within arm's reach of the running German.

He looked anxiously over his shoulder as he heard my footsteps right on his heels. This was it. With one last desperate effort, I grabbed his legs in a flying tackle, and his large frame came crashing down.

We both lay there, exhausted, panting, unable to speak. We had run ourselves into the ground. Using every ounce of strength left, I crawled on top of him. I could not afford to give him time to recover. He was a big customer.

I lay there for some minutes, holding him in a policeman's arm lock, thankful that I had undergone a course in unarmed combat.

'Shoot me . . . shoot me . . .' he pleaded.

My answer was to jerk him to his feet. It was an effort,

for although I was now getting my wind back, I ached in every muscle. At the side of my five feet eight inches, he seemed taller than ever.

Somehow I had to get this big man back to the laager, for it would be regarded as a crime if I lost my prisoner.

I peered into the darkness around me. We were in a featureless waste of rocks and sand, with no horizon, no lights or sound to guide one. Finding a needle in a haystack would be child's play compared with locating our small column of vehicles somewhere in the desert night.

I knew we had been running northwards. The German had made for the coast road, hoping to link up with a stray Afrika Korps unit. So I decided to strike to the south, with little hope of success. I reckoned that there were still several hours to go until dawn.

I tightened my arm lock on the German, and urged him forward. He did not struggle. He was too utterly exhausted and dejected at his failure to escape.

For what seemed like hours we trudged to the south, slowly retracing ground that our flying feet had covered. The prisoner, his head hanging as though in shame, was silent. He had given up the ghost.

I pulled the German to a halt, at a faint sound coming over to the right. In the distance I could hear the phut-phut of a battery-charging engine. We worked our way towards it, and found that we had stumbled on the signals section of our HQ.

My commanding officer, Brigadie. Harvey, and most of his staff officers, were waiting as we drew up to the vehicles. They congratulated me on my capture, but I omitted to tell them about my pistol, somewhere out in the blue.

It took me some time at daylight to recover all the gear I had discarded.

But it was weeks after that fantastic chase before I was able to eat, sleep, walk or run normally again.

# TEN LITTLE SAILOR BOYS

*by Spencer Mynott*

BREAKFAST was being served and we looked forward to another glorious day of sunbathing on deck, as the 9,000-ton liner, S.S. *Britannia*, neared the equator that morning of March 25, 1541.

On board the luxury liner were scores of civilians returning to Bombay, Army and RAF personnel, and 200 'sprog' naval ratings, drafted to an assortment of naval craft and establishments in the Far East.

I, naval telegraphist D/JX204083, was to join the frigate, H.M.S. *Falmouth*, operating in the Persian Gulf, and it was to be my first taste of active service afloat.

In mid-Atlantic, thirteen days out from Liverpool, we had left our convoy, and were 'going it alone', when an explosion shook the ship. A warning shot had been fired across our bows.

Our Scottish captain dropped smoke-flares, altered course, and tried to run for it, but salvoes of eight-inch shells screamed at us, scoring hit after hit. One wiped out our only guncrew, leaving us unarmed, and at the mercy of a Nazi surface raider.

Soon, the after part of the boat deck was on fire, the first-class smoking-room was shattered and burning, and most of the lifeboats were damaged by shell splinters.

We helped to carry the wounded and dying into the dining-hall, and soon it was overcrowded. One of the

guncrew had both his arms and one leg torn off, but he was still conscious as I tried to shift him.

He asked me for a cigarette, and after a couple of puffs, he said: 'I'm posted this time, all right.' Then he died.

Someone shouted: 'Man the lifeboats!' while we were still under way. As I stood at the boat station, another salvo smacked into us, and I saw my best friend torn in half by shrapnel. All I suffered was a splinter of metal in the leg.

Unable to get out of range, the ship hove to, and the surrender flag was hoisted. But still the shells crashed into us.

Within minutes, our attacker came alongside. She was a German cruiser, bristling with armament. Hundreds of sailors lined the rails, peering at us. We thought they were going to come aboard, and take prisoners.

But a voice hailed us across the water in cold, clear English: 'I am giving you thirty minutes to abandon ship, then I am going to sink her.'

We lowered the wounded in those lifeboats that would still float, and tossed rafts overboard. Dead on time, the raider fired a salvo into the *Britannia*, just below the waterline, and our proud ship sank cleanly, and quickly, the old red duster flapping magnificently.

Then the raider made off under full steam, and was soon out of sight. They had not bothered to pick anyone up.

Hundreds of us milled round in the sea, 800 miles from the nearest land, trying to cling to anything that floated. I swam around for six hours, splashing from one piece of driftwood to another. All the time I was trying to keep clear of the burning patch of oil left by our blazing ship.

I was smothered with the thick, black oil, and the fierce equatorial sun beating down on it made me feel that I was being cooked.

I had almost given up hope, when I spotted it—a broken hatch-cover, blown from the ship, seven feet wide by about four feet, not much bigger than a hearthrug.

One man sat on it, head bowed and dejected. Under a mask of oil on his face I recognized a diamond merchant from Bombay whom I had seen aboard ship. I clambered up on to the oil-covered raft, and one by one other survivors reached it.

By nightfall there were six of us—two naval officers, three ratings, including myself, and the diamond merchant.

He sat with his back to us, hugging something closely to him that he did not want us to see.

Suddenly it grew cold, and we shivered in our tropical kit of white shirt and shorts.

The night dragged by with agonizing slowness. Every few minutes our raft overturned, or we were washed off, as a breeze whipped up the waves.

We struggled and fought to keep aboard. As one tried to get on, the rest were tipped back into the sea.

We had heard that man-eating sharks infested these waters, and hoped that our noisy splashing would keep them at bay.

By dawn we were huddled together for warmth in the centre, although we were almost on the equator. But the diamond merchant still sat alone, talking to no one.

Next day three of us who had found time to grab sun-helmets before we jumped overboard used them to paddle towards what looked like a lifeboat. But it was another raft, more crowded than ours. Four of the men on it swam to join us. And so we were ten.

As the day wore on, we prayed for night and the cold it would bring, because the fantastic heat of the sun was frying us alive.

Enormous sharks swished around us, diving under the raft and bumping us in their eagerness to taste human flesh. There was hardly enough room on the raft for all of us to sit comfortably. We sat with legs entwined round each other to save space. We took it in turns to sit at the edge, and thrash our legs in the water to scare the sharks.

By four o'clock on the second day we could hear the

sun sizzling the sea-spray on the bare parts of our bodies.

In the corner the stranger from Bombay began to rave. His eyes bulged like a drug addict's, and he jabbered hysterically about his wife, his children, his diamonds.

Crazy with thirst, he struggled to his feet, slipping on the oil-covered raft. For a second he stood, swaying, wild-eyed, foaming at the mouth.

Then with a hideous scream, he twisted and fell backwards among the threshing, man-hungry sharks.

I watched in horror as his sun-helmet floated on a patch of red-stained water.

A few moments ago there were ten of us on that make-shift raft, drifting near the equator. Ten pain-racked bodies, blistered and swollen by the merciless sun, smothered from head to foot in black oil. We were Ten Little Sailor Boys. Now there were only nine of us left to frizzle in the tropical sun without water or food.

Every minute seemed like an hour under that ball of fire in the sky.

Half-deranged in the glare I was momentarily back on the *Britannia*. There was a party going on, a wonderful party.

There was dancing, glamorous girls, a table laden with food and luscious tropical fruits.

I gulped a glass of cider. Then I was back to the reality of sea, sun and sharks.

Somehow we survived the night, but getting weaker, and worse, losing the will to carry on.

In the shimmering heat next day, a merchant seaman made a grab at my sun-hat, but I fought him off.

He turned to his mate and asked him to come for a walk. They jumped into the sea together. We never saw them again.

That left seven of us.

Before I had fully realized what had happened a naval sub-lieutenant—he came from the Midlands—stood up, mumbled insanely and staggered over the side.

Now there were only six.

We drifted on. Then two more in our party, without regard for the danger, dangled their legs over the side, limply.

The sound of snapping jaws and slithering bodies and they were gone—pulled down by the legs.

Now there were four.

With terror in our eyes, we stared at each other—a naval lieutenant-surgeon, Ginger, a mechanic from Liverpool, Alf Warren from Worcester and myself, a telegraphist.

We were growing weaker, and it seemed only a matter of hours before we went too.

By the fourth sweltering day, our legs, feet and faces were swollen. It was agony to open our mouths.

I prayed for water to ease my parched throat. Then the naval surgeon scooped up some sea-water in both hands.

'Here! Have a drink,' he offered. 'It's lovely stuff.' He scooped more and swallowed thirstily.

That afternoon he fell off the raft, and the three of us struggled to pull him back.

He threw his arms round my neck and nearly strangled me. He fell off again, and became so violent that the next time he tried to get back we stopped him.

He threatened to kill us all, and tried to grab my sheath-knife. For three hours he clung there.

He was getting weaker. But every time we touched him he tried to pull us from the raft.

The blistering sun went down mercifully, and he swam out of sight in the darkness. Perhaps he was lucky enough to drown before the sharks got him.

Now there were three.

That night we faced the fury of a storm. Terrifying waves smashed over our heads, the raft turned over, but we managed to stay together.

As the storm died and the sea calmed, I 'saw' a small hut rise out of the water.



Out of the hut stepped a pig-tailed Chinaman in silken robes. Standing behind him was his daughter.

He asked me to come in for a cup of tea. I said I would love to, but was anxious to reach the mainland quickly.

He replied that he would help us. Turning to his daughter he gave her an order and she dived into the water.

In that instant the vision of the lovely girl disappeared and was replaced with the real and frightening one of a huge brown shark hurling itself at the raft.

By dawn on the fifth day one could tell what each of us was thinking—who goes next?

Our faces were stubbly and sore, covered with oil and blisters. Our eyes were puffed, our lips bloodless and parched.

Ginger shielded his eyes and glanced up at the blazing sun.

He had made up his mind. 'I'm jaggig in now. It's not worth going on,' he said.

Alf and I reminded him of the young bride he had married a few days before leaving England, but it made no difference. He shook hands with us, unstrapped his deflated lifebelt and slipped over the side.

We watched him drift away, his head well under the water.

Now there were two.

It was hours after Ginger had drifted into a circle of sharks that Alf, who had fallen asleep with his head on my knee, sat bolt upright.

'Look!' he shouted. 'On the horizon. Smoke!'

I raised myself unsteadily, with one hand on Alf's shoulder, and croaked as loud as my parched throat would allow, waving my sun-helmet.

The ship loomed nearer, but then seemed to veer away. Alf swung his legs over the side of the raft.

'She's going away!' he shouted. 'I'm going to paddle to her.'

In a flash a shark had his right leg in its jaws, to within an inch of the knee.

I plunged my knife into its snout and the monster slithered back into the water, ripping the flesh on Alf's leg to the bone.

I covered his wound with cloth torn from Ginger's discarded lifebelt.

By this-time the ship was just a speck and a wisp of smoke. We resigned ourselves to another night of torture and slow death. Then, half an hour before dusk, I saw the ship again. She was heading straight for us!

I jumped up and almost upset the raft. I waved my sun-helmet until I was so weak that I had to use both hands to hold it above my head.

All lights ablaze, the Spanish passenger and cargo vessel, *Cabo de Hornos*, lowered a boat.

Gently Alf was carried aboard and that night he had an emergency operation.

I threw my arms around my Spanish rescuers and sobbed my gratitude.

We were landed at Santa Cruz de Tenerife, in the Canary Islands, and I was interned for four months. Then I reached Britain under a repatriation scheme.

Alf was taken to a clinic, outside the internment boundary.

I did not see Alf again until recently—the other one of the ten little sailor boys who helped me cheat that last line of the nursery rhyme:

'AND THEN THERE WAS NONE.'

# GLIDER CRASH

*by David Smith*

FOR weeks we had marched out to a piece of ground not far from our tented camp at Sousse, in North Africa, to see a 'dummy' of our objective, marked out with white tape.

We knew that it was a canal and bridge that we would have to attack some time in the near future, but exactly where and when was the subject of wild rumour and speculation.

Our officers seemed well satisfied with these mock attacks. We were going to be like a well-drilled Guards battalion on Horse Guards' Parade. The whole operation would click from beginning to end. Soon, the bridge would be firmly in our hands, and the demolition charges rendered useless.

This was how we, the red-bereted glider troops of the 2nd Battalion South Staffordsnire Regiment, oozed confidence in June 1943. Rommel had been thrown out of North Africa, and now we were keyed up to attack 'the soft under-belly' of the enemy.

Never, in the long history of the British Army, had an offensive operation been carried out with glider-borne infantry. We, the first of the Red Devils—a name that was later to strike terror into the hearts of the Germans—were to lead the way.

Waiting for our baptism of fire seemed endless. Then, in the first week of July, the news was broken to us. We would

be dropped behind enemy lines to help our forces invading Sicily!

The bridge we were to seize crossed a canal about three miles south of Syracuse. This canal formed a natural defence line, and had to be crossed. The bridge would be taken intact, so that ground forces could cross and capture the port.

The flight plan was from Sousse to Malta, where three searchlights, in the form of Prince of Wales feathers, would point straight to the sky, pin-pointing the turn into Sicily.

On the late afternoon of Friday, July 9, we disembarked at the airstrip and saw endless lines of tube-shaped black-painted wooden gliders lined up for take-off.

Each glider carries thirty men and two pilots. The cockpit forms the nose, and can be shut off from the rest of the fuselage by a door. Standing with your back to this cockpit, you see a bench running down the left side, to a narrow door.

Beyond that door, in the tail, is a seat for three, running at right angles across the fuselage.

I, a gunner of the machine-gun support section of 'C' Company, was detailed to sit there. And it was a fateful decision.

Before I clambered aboard the glider, I removed my webbing equipment which included, among other items, ten loaded Bren-gun magazines, and laid it on the ground.

I was the only man carrying such weighty equipment, so I planned to leave it under my seat, until the time came to leap out into action.

Lieutenant Robey, commander of No. 16 Platoon, checked the seating, and ordered us to test our seat straps. Without thinking, I adjusted the waist and shoulder straps to my body, pulling them tight. When I had done this, I hauled in the heavy ammunition magazines, and placed them under the seat.

Everything needed for a lightning war was loaded and

strapped in. The Horsa glider was hooked to the tail of a twin-engined Albemarle, and we were ready to go.

There was a sharp jerk as the tug plane took up the slack in the tow rope. A brief rumbling noise and vibration as the glider wheels bumped over the uneven ground, then silence, broken only by the swish of air.

As the glider surged and tugged under the power of the tow plane, my stomach muscles knotted, and a feeling of helpless insecurity swept over me. This was not a new experience. It always happened to me on training flights back in England.

Permission was given for straps to be released. I pulled the quick release tabs on mine, and let them fall away from my body. Then I bent over and touched the Bren and my equipment under the seat, to make sure that they did not slide about.

It was becoming dark inside the glider now and, although I could not see out of the windows, I knew we had climbed steadily to about 2,000 feet.

Normally, unless the weather is rough, there is very little noise inside a glider. Above the gentle sighing of the wind, and the occasional creaking of the woodwork, it is possible to carry on conversation.

But now a wind of near-gale force was beating and buffeting the craft.

There was a light, empty feeling in my stomach, and I began to feel sick. My eyelids felt heavy, and a strange weariness stole over me.

The glider began to pitch heavily. The wings dipped, and the craft side-slipped, only to be brought up with a heart-stopping jerk by the tightening tow rope. I felt sweat in the palms of my hands, and rubbed them guiltily on my flying smock.

In misery I felt for my greased bag and vomited. I had been sick in England, on smoother flights than this.

Between bouts of retching I must have slept. It was part of my air-sickness to sleep . . . perhaps some compensation.

Time ceased to exist.<sup>6</sup> I did not know how long we had been flying, and I cared less. I was only half-conscious of other sounds around me, booted feet stirring uneasily, disjointed words which would be lost as someone vomited noisily.

Suddenly, cutting through my misery, a curt order. Did it mean I had to do something?

I opened<sup>7</sup> my eyes and wiped the sweat from my face. By the light of small bulbs in the glider's interior, I could see that my comrades were gathering up their equipment, and strapping it to their bodies.

The 450-mile flight was nearly over. We were only twenty minutes from the dropping zone.

I hauled myself up from the seat, where I lay sprawling, reached for my webbing, and buckled it on with clammy hands.

A muffled explosion seemed to bump the glider, and my stomach turned over again. The thought raced through my mind: What happens to a wooden glider when a high-explosive shell smacks into it?

Perhaps it was my rioting imagination, but the rest of the lads seemed to be looking at the floor of the craft. Would the shell come through the floor before it exploded?

A shadowy figure stood at the doorway of the pilot's compartment. It was Lieutenant Robey, the platoon commander.

He turned, and said, quietly: 'Fasten your safety belts.'

Pushing myself back against the wall of the glider, I reached for my belt. It seemed a mile too short, and would not meet round my waist. Fumbling desperately with it, I realized that I was now wearing my bulky equipment, and the belt had been adjusted *without* it.

It was too late to try to alter it, so I held the waist belt at each side of my body, hoping the landing would not be too violent.

Down the long, dim tunnel of the glider, came the

urgent shout from Lieutenant Robey: 'Hold tight! We are going straight down.'

The craft lurched, as we were cast off, and our tow plane headed for home. Now we were alone, gliding gently, noiselessly into the blackness below.

With a sickening shock, we began to nose-dive. Totally unprepared, and with no safety belt to hold me, I was flung forward. My boots slipped wildly, as I struggled to hold myself back in my seat.

I was worried about the Bren gun under the seat. It was loaded with a magazine, and the action was cocked. If it slipped, it might fire. I could not remember whether it was set on 'automatic'.

With terrific impact, our glider hit something. The noise seemed to go on for ever . . . smashing, grinding, crashing, mixed with the shrill screams from my pals.

In the inky darkness I could not understand where I was. There was no seat. I was lying on my face. Dust was choking me. Acrid fumes from the glider's batteries caught at my throat and nose.

I was dazed and did not know what to do. Then, into my confused mind, rushed the thought, compelling, and urgent: the Bren gun. I must find the gun.

Putting my hands out, I tried to feel for some familiar object, expecting to touch the splintered wreck of the glider. But they touched rubble, like small boulders. What were they doing inside the glider? Was I still inside it?

My safety belt! It hadn't been fastened, and I must have been thrown forward.

I swivelled round on my hands and knees, and saw a glimmer of light through a swirling cloud. It was not dust—but smoke. The wreckage was on fire.

Faintly, I could see the jagged outline of a wall, where our glider had crashed into it.

Somewhere amidst the flaming wreckage and debris were several six-foot lengths of iron piping, stuffed with gun

cotton. . . . Bangalore Torpedoes, used for cutting barbed wire defences. In there, too, were anti-tank mines fastened to poles, for blowing holes in pill-boxes, as well as a large wicker hamper full of mortar bombs and grenades.

I was crouched there, on hands and knees, on top of enough explosive to blow up the Houses of Parliament.

That grey light filtering through the smoke, I thought, must lead to the open air. Slowly I scrambled, still on hands and knees, towards the opening.

It was the door in the tail. Reaching it, I poked my head through, and had to look down for the floor. It was several feet beneath me. And lying very still down there was the body of one of my mates.

Drawing myself up with the aid of the door edge, I leapt out to one side, landing heavily. Still on hands and knees I moved over to the still form on the ground.

It was too dark for me to recognize who it was, or to make out what injuries he had, but there didn't appear to be any life left. Before I could decide what to do, I heard shouts that appeared to come from the other side of the mound of wreckage.

They were desperate calls for help. Here were people still alive who needed me. Getting to my feet, I moved round what was left of the glider tail and into a thick wall of smoke. Voices were coming from it, so I moved in feeling my way with my feet, and peering hard to see. Several struggling forms loomed up in the murk. They were pulling at someone who was still trapped in the wreckage.

Someone was sobbing: 'It's no good . . . it's no good.' There were flames here, flickering in the smoke. Over the sound of the sobbing voice came the clattering, scrambling of boots.

A voice, cracked and hoarse, panted: 'Anyone here, get away quick. The ammo's on fire. It's going up!'

I turned and broke into a shambling run, not knowing in which direction I was going. Over to my right came the sound of other running feet. Then a thudding, crashing



roar and, for the second time in a matter of minutes, I was lying flat on my face, all the wind knocked out of me, bits and pieces showering on and around me.

Eight other survivors staggered with me to the safety of the wood. Five of them were badly injured, one with his shoulder broken. Both our glider pilots and the platoon commander died in the crash.

I was unhurt, the only damage being a broken signet ring that belonged to my grandfather. It must have snapped when I gripped the safety-belt straps to stop my self falling forward.

At dawn the able-bodied ones among us struck out for help towards the Eighth Army beach-head at Avola. It was pointless heading towards enemy lines, for we had only two pistols left from that huge arsenal in the glider.

It was not long before we linked up with our Battalion—or what was left of it. No. 17 Platoon's glider had crashed, killing all except one officer. No. 18 Platoon had crash-landed ten miles from the rendezvous, but had fought through, suffering some casualties.

But, despite all, No. 15 Platoon landed only 100 yards from the bridge, attacked it, and took it intact from the Italians, enabling the Eighth Army to seize Syracuse.

So our objective had been achieved. But this glider assault was the first—and the last—ever to be carried out in darkness.

# NAGASAKI

*by Edward Anderson*

A 'GIANT flash lit up the sky with the searing brilliance of a dozen suns.

I flung myself headlong, and tried to shield my eyes from the blinding glare.

Then, with a roar like 100 express trains, tremendous blast-waves seemed to race towards me.

The earth shook, buildings swayed, and every pane of glass left its socket in a hail of splinters.

In terror, I lay in the middle of a road, waiting for the end.

I dared to lift my head and open my eyes. What I saw high above, through a swirling dust-storm, made my heart pound faster.

A mushroom-shaped pillar of purple fire was rising, 10,000 feet over Nagasaki. I did not realize then that I was eye-witness to the explosion of the second atomic bomb.

Awe-struck, I watched it shoot skywards at a tremendous speed, billowing death in all directions.

An eerie twilight of dust and smoke began to descend, blotting out the sun.

In the gloomy half-darkness I could detect ghostly shapes of humans stumbling for the safety of a shelter. I groped my way towards them.

Soon, we were huddled together, a grime-blackened,

sweat-stained, skinny bunch of prisoners of war, stunned and frightened by an explosion more powerful than anything we had known.

A new and terrible force had been unleashed that day of August 9, 1945, and I could tell by the terror in the faces of the Japs that it might spell freedom for me.

For more than four unhappy years—since February 1941—I had been a prisoner of the devilish Japs.

I was Chief Petty Officer aboard the 8730-ton cruiser H.M.S. *Exeter*, a gallant ship I had served in since March 1940.

We arrived in the Far East just as the Japanese were achieving the peak of their success. On convoy duty between Singapore and Batavia, we were bombed mercilessly by them.

Constant air attack, and long hours at action stations in the stifling heat, made us utterly weary, but our morale was unshaken.

On Friday, February 27, 1941, we first engaged Japanese naval forces. We were a mixed force of British, Dutch, Australian and American warships, under the command of a Dutch admiral.

It was a great relief to measure ourselves against enemy surface craft, as all our actions up to this point had been against Japanese planes.

We had been in action for only a few minutes, when we sustained a hit in 'B' boiler room. The damage so seriously impaired our efficiency as a fighting unit, that we were ordered to retire. A smoke-screen hid us from Japs coming in for the kill, and we were able to limp into Sourabaya, Java, at about six knots just before midnight.

Next day, we buried our dead, and repaired as much damage as possible. Throughout the day Jap spy planes watched our movements.

That night, we sailed in brilliant moonlight on what our captain called a 'getaway bid'. We steamed all night without incident at twenty-two knots. Just after 8 a.m. two

enemy cruisers and destroyers were sighted. There was no doubt about it. We were trapped in the Java Sea.

Only one way of escape lay open to us . . . through the Sundra Straits, but the might of the Jap Navy lay in wait there for us.

We were no match for them. There was our patched-up veteran, *Exeter*, and *Encounter* and *Pope*, British and American destroyers which had experienced the first flush of youth many years before this battle.

Every shell fired from our guns caused the ship to shudder violently. Before long the mess decks were strewn with broken crockery, and heaps of tea, sugar and milk tins which had been shaken from their shelves.

A sudden lurch told us that we had been hit. This time it was in 'A' boiler room, our only sound boiler room, which gave us most of our power.

Our ammunition ran out, and we were left disabled and defenceless. An order was broadcast: 'Flood all magazines. Abandon ship!'

I reached the upper deck and heard the ear-splitting crack of gunfire from five enemy cruisers and six destroyers. It was disconcerting to think that we were the focal point of all their guns.

Thinking that the safest place was the sea, I dived overboard. As I surfaced, I saw my favourite pair of carpet slippers floating away on the current.

Clouds of black smoke were billowing from the *Exeter's* funnels, lurid tongues of flame reaching out to envelop the smoke. Gradually, the old lady listed to starboard, heeled right over, and disappeared in a flurry of foam. She had met an honourable and tenacious end.

For eight hours, under the scorching sun, I clung to a raft with other survivors, until a Jap destroyer picked us up.

At rare intervals the little brown men gave each of us a handful of sticky rice, a teaspoon or two of meat, and a mug of brackish water. The rice sickened me, but the meat revived me.

First by oil tanker, then in the hospital ship *Optenoorte*, we were taken to Macassar, in the island of Celebes, Dutch East Indies, and thrown into barracks that once housed Dutch Indonesian troops.

Jeering crowds lined up to watch us force-marched barefoot on roads so hot that molten asphalt burned our feet to blisters.

It was not long before the ship's captain and the rest of the senior officers were taken to Japan. Eight months later, men with technical experience followed them. I was one.

We lay, sweltering, in the bowels of the Jap hell ship, the *Asama Maru*. At night, huge creatures, covered with rustling scales, would crawl over one's face. Once, I woke with a start to find one biting at my throat.

Another night, in heavy seas, a terrific crash jolted us from our weary sleepiness.

Panic seized us, 250 prisoners battened down in the hold, as the cry went up: 'We've been torpedoed!'

There was a mad scramble for the two ladders, the only escape from the hold. Men clawed at each other wildly. We kicked and fought in the struggle to get out.

But it was a false alarm. Timbers piled on deck had toppled into the hold with a resounding crash.

Screened by black-out curtains to prevent us seeing too much, we were landed secretly near the seaport of Nagasaki at night.

Then we were led to a hutted camp at Fukuoma, an island shanty-town in the harbour.

Fifty-six of us were crammed into each hut. There were bare planks for beds, four blankets, but no palliasses or pillows.

Fresh from the tropics, we were plunged into a bitterly cold winter. Our only clothes were of cotton; our footwear, plimsolls.

We were humiliated, starved and beaten by ferocious six-foot guards armed with baseball bats.

Each day, fifty of us were chosen to be beaten up for the entertainment of Japanese shipyard workers, who formed a laughing, joking ring round us.

One by one our men fell ill and died, many from pneumonia. But the Japanese doctors did nothing for us.

I was determined that one day they would suffer for their callousness—and kept a careful note of all the events and atrocities I witnessed.

Pencil and paper were forbidden, but all my mates knew I planned to keep a secret diary, and a stub of pencil was found.

By my bed lay a pile of coarse paper strips for toilet use. Between each plain sheet, I placed completed diary pages. Jap searchers never discovered them.

The Japs were often easy to spoof. We sabotaged their ships by putting abrasive paste into oil sumps of fan and dynamo engines; nuts and bolts into steam pipes; spot-welding sledge hammers to ship's decks, and tossing stores overboard.

They never suspected us, but cruelly beat their own men for being idiots.

Our hatred of them grew. They withheld medical supplies, plundered our Red Cross parcels, and allowed us a diet which barely kept us alive.

By August 1545 we were so weak and dispirited that we knew we could not survive another winter.

At this time I had been demoted to roadsweeper. And at 11 a.m. on August 9 I was sweeping the dusty road five miles from Nagasaki, dressed in jockey cap and a sweat-stained green Dutch uniform.

It was a bright, cloudless day. Not a breath of wind. Everything was still. Distant objects shimmered in the heat haze.

I had not bothered to glance up at the faint drone of a plane in the sky.

Suddenly came THE FLASH—of such intense brilliance that the glory of the morning paled.

In the same split-second a thunderous explosion reverberated terrifyingly from one hilltop to another around Nagasaki.

A sickening whirlwind of furnace-hot air swept through the doomed seaport, as I pressed myself to the ground, paralysed with fear.

The thought flashed across my mind—chemical warfare!

Gasping, and choking with dust, I stumbled to an old tunnel which was waist-deep in sea-water, hoping to find a wet sack to put over my head for protection.

Other British, Dutch, and American prisoners sheltered there. We stood, trembling, dust clinging to our sweat-stained bodies, amazed to find we were unhurt.

We looked up in awe at the great pillar of smoke towering above Nagasaki. Brown and orange flames were licking round the massive column.

The summit had spread out over itself like a gigantic mushroom, from the circumference of which ragged tentacles reached downwards towards the earth.

Frightened guards rounded us up, and marched us back to camp. Glancing over my shoulders, I saw a black oil shroud over Nagasaki which, that night, became tinged with rosy flames.

At our camp, a mile and a half from the shipyard, most of the windows were shattered. The end walls of buildings bulged like bubbles.

Lines of fearfully burned Japanese were brought from stricken Nagasaki to the island hospital.

I was shocked to see the ghastly burns of young children, and pity welled up inside me. Adult Japs with them looked at us in anger, as if they could kill us.

In the days that followed it was obvious to the dullest of us that release was at hand.

There was no work, because the fantastic blast had cut off all power. Our fierce guards—no longer in steel helmets—began to smile at us. Valuables they had seized were

handed back, and what remained of the Red Cross food was handed out.

A message in a food parcel, parachuted in by the American Air Force, told us what we wanted to know: that Japan had surrendered after the dropping of a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, the first having been dropped on Hiroshima three days earlier.

No one knew what an atom bomb was. But soon we were to witness the terrible effects of one little bomb dropped from one plane in a split second of time.

Nagasaki was a city of the dead. The devastation was appalling. There was no skyline. As far as the eye could see there was not a standing house—only piles of rubble.

Whole sides of what had been verdant mountains were scorched black.

The valley was a featureless expanse of charred, broken fragments of houses, factories, schools—and humans.

Thick steel girders were twisted and torn. Remnants of them stood like melted candles.

It seemed impossible that such awful destruction which had wiped out 73,900 Japanese had come from one single explosion.

But the A-bomb had ended my suffering and brought freedom to me and thousands of fellow prisoners.



# ORDEAL ON ICE ISLAND

by John Swainston

IT STARTED at midnight. Sea and sky seemed part of one black mass. It was freezing but I was on deck enjoying a cigarette. And then a great wrenching, splitting noise tore through the ship.

She shuddered, gave a sickening heave and roll, and veered right round. We had hit a submerged iceberg. The tanks and ammunition we carried would never reach the Russians at Murmansk.

There were fifty-eight of us aboard the slowly sinking merchant ship *Chulmleigh*, but there was no panic as we lowered lifeboats into the icy water off the North Cape of Norway.

I called to my pal, Gunner Sam Pepper, who was serving with me on board the 5,445-ton *Chulmleigh* as ship's guncrew.

We had soldiered together since the war began and I wanted to be in the same boat.

But the boat he was in was full, and I was ordered into another.

That was the last time I saw Sam. His lifeboat was never heard of again.

In the thin grey light of approaching dawn we saw two German bombers.

They had spotted the sinking ship and were swooping down to finish it off with their bombs.

We feared they would finish us off, too, but perhaps they thought there was no hope for us anyway. They flew off without touching us.

So began the first stage of our Arctic ordeal—eight days freezing in an open boat, our lips stretched across our frost-bitten faces, our fingers curled like claws in the cold.

On the third day the boat's engine gave out.

We drifted, already too numbed and weak to use the oars or steer a course.

Our rations of water, biscuits and malted-milk tablets were dwindling. Soon the water was finished and thirst was added to our torture.

It was on the fourth day that we discovered that two of the seamen we had believed were dozing at the bottom of the boat were dead.

It took all our failing strength to lift the corpses and throw them overboard. Next day the steward tore at his clothes, staring at us unseeingly and shouting.

He had gone mad with thirst. We tried to quieten him, but his crazy strength was too much for us.

He fought his way towards the side of the boat, beating off our weak hold, and fell into the sea.

Within seconds he was out of sight in the black water and beyond all aid.

So we drifted in numb helplessness, almost resigned to death. Then, on the eighth day, we sighted land.

The sight stirred us to a final effort and we pulled towards the shore.

But the coast was a mass of rocks, over which thundered rollers that would have smashed the boat.

For hours we searched for a place to land, until, by dark, we were too exhausted to care.

We lay huddled together, dozing, in the boat.

A tremendous roaring woke us up. The crashing waves were sweeping us on to a reef.

Then a miracle happened. A huge wave lifted us over the

rocks and the boat ran aground on a sloping shore thick with snow.

We threw ourselves into the snow, cramming handfuls of it into our mouths to quench our thirst, and then lay there the rest of the night.

Daylight brought us new hope. Farther inland were some wooden cabins.

We blundered to them through the snow, but most of them were in ruins.

One, however, was habitable, and in it was a stove and even matches and some coffee beans in a tin.

We collected driftwood, made a fire and had a hot drink. It tasted wonderful.

Though we did not know it, we had landed on one of the Spitzbergen Islands in the Arctic, and these were trappers' huts.

Full of hope, the Third Mate and another of the crew set off to find help. They came back, hours later, exhausted.

Beyond the shore, they reported, was nothing but a wilderness of rocks and ice and ravines.

We lay, huddled together, through the Arctic night. We seemed to freeze to the floor. Hope died in us.

Twenty-six of us had landed from the boat, but in the first three or four days ashore thirteen died from frostbite, starvation and exhaustion.

Every few hours we had to bury a comrade.

We could not scratch graves in the frozen earth, so we laid them in clefts in the rocks and covered their bodies with snow.

Among them was the cabin boy. He was only sixteen, a bright-eyed youngster who had shown a man's courage.

All one night he lay sobbing and then fell into a kind of stupor. He must have been dreaming, for he was talking to his mother.

Then suddenly he was dead.

Most times we knew when one of us was dying. The pattern was nearly always the same.

The man began, like the steward in the boat, tearing his clothes off as though suffering from intolerable heat and then fought to get out into the snow. Soon he died.

By the fifth day our rations were finished. Now, we thought, we were facing the end. But then came miracle No. 2.

I and two of my mates, Tom Whiteside, from Liverpool, and Bill Bennett, both gunners, went out on a last, desperate quest for aid—and we found, about a mile and a half away, another shack.

Inside was a sack, four feet high, full of flour. We called the others to help carry it, but we were so weak that even ten of us could not lug the sack to our hut.

We had to carry the flour, tinsful at a time.

We ate some mouthfuls of it as it was, but it didn't taste so good, so we crouched round discussing how this Heaven-sent food might be used.

Andy Hardy, who came from the Hebrides, solved this problem. He told us how his mother cooked bannocks—little unleavened loaves—at home.

We mixed flour with melted snow, flattened the paste on pieces of tin and baked it over the fire. Andy's bannocks kept us alive for the next four weeks.

Almost as strongly as the desire for food we felt the need for light in that perpetual darkness.

We punched a hole in a tin, put in a shred of clothing for a wick and filled the tin with engine oil and seal oil we found in the hut.

Our lamp gave more smoke than light, but its glow beat back the hopeless blackness.

By now we were too weak to crawl to the driftwood, so we used sparingly the wreck of a nearby hut to keep the fire going.

Ounce by ounce the flour was used up, and at last came the day when Andy cooked our last bannocks.

Once again we began scratching around for food . . . for anything at all that we could eat.

At last, in a tin about the size of a biscuit box from which we had drained oil for our lamp, we found a hunk of putrid meat.

I think it was seal. It stank. We cut it into slices and hung it up outside to freeze.

We rationed ourselves to one cube a day each of this flesh. It tasted foul, but we ate it. We were keeping death at bay.

By now there were only nine of us alive, a wild-looking bunch of starving men, bearded, hollow-cheeked, glaring-eyed. We moved about very little for our feet were frostbitten.

I had long ago discarded my boots, not being able to bear the agony of wearing them, and had swathed my feet in rags.

Most times we crawled about on hands and knees.

We wondered how long it would be before we were too weak even to drag a piece of wood to the stove, let alone carry the corpses of another comrade to the rocks.

Then one day—our fifty-third day on the island—the silence of the hut was broken by a hammering on the door.

One of us crawled to the door and opened it. Outside were two men, in uniforms, with rifles at the ready. They were Norwegians.

They had been hunting game in the hills, and only by chance had they come near enough to see the smoke from the stove.

When they realized we were British they opened their packs and produced bully beef and biscuits, then they hurried off, promising to send a rescue party.

Hours later the rescuers came with sledges and blankets, and dragged us over the rocks and ice-fields to their camp.

We were there for two months. And we learned for the first time where we were—and that the island was a secret Norwegian base.

News of our rescue was sent to London, but we were not

allowed to write home, and our families could not be told where we were.

It was June 1543, seven months after the sinking of our ship, that we nine survivors of a crew of fifty-eight were taken home in a British cruiser.

We were in a bad way. The Third Mate, for example, had lost all his fingers with frostbite.

I was lucky. By some miracle I had come through those seven months in the Arctic unharmed.

# HUMAN TORPEDO

*by Albert Brown D.S.M.*

I CLUNG desperately to the canister holding the high explosive as my head broke the surface of the water.

Blood still seeped from the wound in my head.

My mission to blow up the Japanese troopship had gone wrong from the start.

Clutched in my arms was the explosive which would blow the ship—and maybe myself—sky-high.

And the time-clock to detonate it was ticking off the fatal minutes.

Two years before I had volunteered for 'special duties' . . . and did not know that it meant becoming a human torpedo.

I had trained at Gosport, at the oxygen experimental station at Surbiton, in the Firth of Clyde, and the Outer Hebrides.

It was while training at the submarine depot base at Rothesay in the Firth of Clyde that I met the girl I wanted to marry . . . as soon as the war was over.

She wrote me a letter just before I left Trincomalee in Ceylon on October 22, 1944.

The P.S. said: 'Take care of yourself, darling.'

Within hours of getting the letter I was in a submarine to a rendezvous with my most dangerous mission of the war.

I was twenty-three and had volunteered for this type of

work . . . just because I was bored being a wardroom steward.

The submarine *Trenchant* reached our target point six and a half miles outside Phuket harbour in Siam after seven days and seven nights.

Zero hour was 20.00.

We were ahead of time and surfaced in a bay farther along the coast from the harbour.

Six of us who had been chosen to do the job . . . two two-man crews and a spare crew . . . went up on deck for fresh air and a look around.

About three miles away I could make out the silhouettes of Jap ships entering and leaving a harbour farther along from our target.

Then it was time to go below and put on our kit. I put on long woollen drawers, a singlet, a shirt, and a thick white pullover.

Over this I put on a suit of denims. And last, my rubber diving suit.

Packed in the seams of my denims was local currency, twenty-five gold sovereigns, a silk map, a small dagger, needle and thread in case of wounds, hacksaw blades . . . and a tablet of poison in case of capture and torture by the Japs.

One of the buttons was a compass. In a pocket I had a .38 revolver and ammunition. In another, a watch.

By seven o'clock I was clothed and ready to go. There was one hour to zero. The heat in the submerged submarine was almost unbearable.

Sweat ran down my face and body inside the rubber suit. Then it was eight o'clock. Four of us lowered the two 'chariots' into the water.

I didn't see the other 'chariot' leave. We were on our way with six and a half miles to go to our target.

The moon was high and bright. We submerged three feet so that our eyes were just above the level of the water.

Petty Officer Smith was my driver and navigator.



In the new type midget submarines we were using I had to sit with my back to him facing the way we had come.

At our briefing we had been warned that the area might be mined.

But I had something else to worry about.

During our trimming dive . . . to get the 'chariot' on an even keel . . . the air vent of my suit on top of my head had broken with the pressure of the water and pierced the top of my head.

Blood oozed from my scalp and trickled down my face . . . and sealed in my rubber suit I couldn't do a thing about it.

Within minutes I was flooded from neck to foot with water.

Worse came when after half an hour in the sea we found the warhead on the nose of our 'chariot' was loose and banging about.

I had to dismount and move gingerly round to the bow of our craft to fix it.

I didn't dare let go of our 'chariot' or I would have dropped like a stone to the sea-bed with the weight of water in my suit.

We carried on towards our target, surfacing now and then to check our bearings. By good luck we didn't come against any boom.

At the harbour entrance on our port side were berthed the Jap submarine chasers. Just beyond them was the troop-carrier *Volpi*. She was listing twenty degrees towards the shore. Our job was to blow her up before the Jap divers could get her afloat and at sea.

For our troops were advancing into Siam and the Japs were working against time to have the ship ready for evacuating their troops.

As the hull of the ship loomed up in the darkness Petty Officer Smith stopped the motor. We glided alongside, diving at the same time to forty feet.

Then we found the high explosive charge could not be fixed under the hull as planned.

The ship's list and the shingle prevented us getting far enough under the hull for the charge to do the most good.

And there were so many barnacles on the ship's plates that we couldn't get the warhead right up against her.

With our main ballast discharging we rose to fifteen feet and stopped. For the third time now I got off the 'chariot' and edged my way round to examine the side of the ship.

I found we were level with the starboard side of the deck which was under water. This time I unscrewed the warhead and took it with me. I tried to lash it to one of the deck fittings and took the pin out of the time-setting clock.

If the clock was working properly the charge would go off in two hours. But sometimes these clocks were very erratic . . . as many 'human torpedoes' found to their cost.

But as I moved away the lashing parted.

I had to find some other way of anchoring the charge. I decided to try to get below decks. I couldn't see more than a couple of feet in front of me.

Blood was still seeping slowly from the wound in my scalp. Around me everything was silent. On the deck above me was the workshop of the Jap divers . . . so we had been warned at our briefing.

I waited . . . listening for any sound, with these questions tumbling through my mind:

Could they hear me?

Were they moving about examining the ship?

What the hell was I going to do if I bumped into one holding this canister of explosives in my arms?

The warhead was six feet long and so wide my arms wouldn't meet round it.

Slowly letting air out of my water-laden suit I walked up and across the tilted deck, and found my first bit of luck . . . a companionway leading down into the ship.

I inched my way down the steps clutching my dangerous cargo. I could hear the time-clock ticking away the precious minutes.

Outside, my No. 1 would be wondering what had happened to me.

Twice I was aware I had lost consciousness for a couple of seconds. I gashed my hand on a piece of twisted metal.

I tried to think of something else as I edged my way down through the darkness.

I thought of girls at home in Hastings, Sussex, where I had been brought up, and of drinks at the 'local' with my pals . . . but mostly of girls.

Then another piece of luck. I saw machinery and found I was in the engine-room . . . the heart of the ship. It couldn't be better.

I wedged the warhead under some machinery with the magnets holding it in position. Twenty minutes had been ticked off by the time-clock.

I reset it to go off at 6 a.m. Our information was that the divers changed over then. With luck we could get both lots as well as the ship.

It was time to get back. I reached the spot where I had left our 'chariot'. Petty Officer Smith had circled round and was heading back towards me.

Still I had neither heard nor seen any sign of the Jap divers, but there was no time to get into the 'chariot'. I clung on to the back and was towed out to sea.

Outside the harbour my No. 1 stopped to let me get into the bus. Then off to rendezvous with the sub.

It was a nightmare trip. My head had stopped bleeding but my hand was bleeding badly . . . and I was sure the blood would attract sharks.

I cursed myself . . . called myself a bloody fool . . . for I had left my issue of anti-shark cream back at base.

All the way back a silvery shape moved alongside us. I couldn't make out if it was a shark or just a large fish.

We reached the *Trenchant* at 2.40 a.m.

We were safe . . . I thought. But the submarine commander called to us to scuttle the 'chariot'. We were being chased.

I didn't hear the order for the blood and water in my ears. I was still plugged in for oxygen when suddenly our torpedo nose-dived.

Smith's leg hit me in the back of the neck as I dived under him. I grabbed it and hung on. Our shipmates on the sub pulled us both aboard. The other team were back safely.

The *Trenchant* dived and we lay on the sea-bed for three hours as Jap anti-submarine craft searched for us above.

Then at 6 a.m. we rose to periscope depth to watch the fireworks. We waited anxiously as the minutes ticked by. Then came the explosions close together on our two targets . . . columns of water and huge pieces of metal were thrown into the air.

Our mission had been successful.

Twenty-seven days later, after attacking a convoy on route, we were back at Trincomalee drinking tots of rum to celebrate.

The day I got back I was rated up to an Able-Bodied seaman. I was no longer a steward.

I got a D.S.M. for my part in the action.

At the end of 1945 I was posted back to England and demobbed in March 1946. I married the girl I had left behind at Rothesay on the Isle of Bute in June.

Just before I was posted back from the Far East the secret I had kept for three years was found out.

The secret? I couldn't swim a stroke.

# THE WOMEN KILLERS

*by George Valantine*

ON A day in January 1945 when my wife was told I was dead, and received her widow's pension book, I was lying in a barn in a snowbound village in Greece surrounded by a gang of strange women killers.

They were young women dressed in men's clothes—German or English battledress and forage caps—and had long ugly knives stuck in their belts. They carried rifles; bandoliers of ammunition were crossed over their breasts.

They were wild and ferocious Amazons, their black hair long and unkempt and their dark eyes savage with suspicion and hatred. They struck more terror into me than any men would have done, and I had heard ugly rumours of the unmentionable barbarities they had wreaked on men who had fallen defenceless into their hands.

I was one of a band of British held prisoner by Greek revolutionaries, but as far as the British Army was concerned I was 'missing, believed killed', for a charred body discovered in our burnt-out barracks in Athens had been identified as me.

My uncanny and terrifying ordeal as a prisoner of ELAS, the Greek revolutionary army, began in Athens on the night of December 13, 1944.

I was a sergeant with 331 RASC Company, attached to the 23rd Armoured Brigade, and we had gone to Athens to unload food and supplies at the docks which we took in

convoy to the distribution centres for the starving Greeks.

This 'mercy operation' proved to be as dangerous as any action against an enemy. Greece was in a tumult of civil war, and the streets of Athens were littered with ruins. Sometimes the convoys I led had to run the gauntlet of a murderous crossfire between Greek National Guard and ELAS revolutionaries.

After three weeks of this, on the afternoon of December 13, other platoon sergeants and I were called to a meeting at which our Company Sergeant-Major outlined a plan that had been made between the National Guard and the British Army.

- The National Guard had decided to attack a block of flats which ELAS had seized near our barracks. The plan was that the National Guard should enter the barracks by the main gate at midnight and storm the ELAS stronghold.

We were ordered to let them pass, but not to take part in any fighting unless we were attacked.

After passing on these instructions to the twenty men in my platoon I lay down on my bunk fully dressed waiting for the fun to start.

Sure enough, Greeks in British battledress appeared within the barrack walls. From our billet we could see them taking up positions.

But their behaviour puzzled us. They were helping themselves to ammunition and petrol from our dump.

Suddenly there was a deafening explosion, and part of the 12 ft high barrack wall went up in a cloud of debris and smoke. Then through the 8 ft wide gap torn in the defences poured a horde of yelling exultant revolutionaries.

We realized then that the plot had miscarried. The Greeks we had seen were not National Guards at all: they were ELAS men who had breached the walls to let in their comrades.

Hundreds of them attacked our billet, yelling 'English come out!' throwing hand grenades and petrol bombs, and firing every kind of rifle imaginable.

Within minutes the billet was a raging inferno. One of my men—Driver Palmer from Devon—was killed with the first shots. Others were wounded.

We fought back. With our three Bren guns and some tommy-guns we killed, I think, around two hundred of our attackers.

But after two hours it was obvious we could hold out no longer. The billet was in flames, the beds were blazing and we were blinded and choked with the smoke.

I crawled round to my platoon officer, Lieutenant Amond, and reported the position. He ordered us to surrender.

Unarmed we stepped out, one by one. The yelling mob seized us. Frenzied hands clutched at me, as though to tear my uniform from me, and as they did so my revolver, which I had forgotten, fell to the ground in front of me.

One of the ELAS men grabbed it and pointed it at me. For a second I faced death: I was saved only by the frenzy of the mob surging around, pulling me out of the line of fire as they tried to tear my uniform from me.

We were dragged into the flats and locked up there until night fell. Then we were led out, to a dark street behind the flats. Here was a long, deep trench that had been used as a latrine and we were ordered to jump into it.

'This,' I thought, 'is it.' I believed we were to be executed there and buried. But that was not the idea. The trench was the beginning of the route along which we were marched into the northern suburbs of Athens.

Here the revolutionaries were in command and we tramped in single file through jeering crowds who gave us the thumbs-down 'Kaput' sign.

Thus began our nightmare march north. Six weeks of agony, cold and near starvation as we struggled on through snow-covered mountain passes.

Where we were bound for we never knew. I don't think our ELAS guards were very clear about it either. They were merely passing us on from village to village.

We had no idea either what fate awaited us when we did eventually reach our destination, and at first this uncertainty seemed our worst torment. Later we got past caring. We lived from day to day, snatching the scraps of black bread and goat cheese our guards spared us from their meagre rations and wrapping our frostbitten feet in scraps of torn cloth as our boots fell to pieces.

I managed to keep a diary from day to day, listing the names of the villages we passed through, and those where we spent freezing nights on the floors of churches or cattlesheds or deserted houses.

But I never succeeded in keeping a record of my fellow prisoners. These changed from day to day.

Some nights when we arrived at yet another snowed-up village we would find another party of them. Some marched with us for a time, pulling themselves painfully through the snow and ice, then fell out and we never saw them again.

Those of us who could keep up with the columns tried at all times to stick together. It was dangerous to be alone, for then you became the prey for villagers or guards who would rob you of the very clothes you wore.

And always there were those women. This band of terrifying Amazons had joined us north of Athens. During the day's march they kept at the tail-end of the column, waiting to pounce on any stragglers. These wild-eyed camp followers were like sharks following a boat full of dying men.

At night they lounged around the camp, eyeing us fiercely and gazing covetously at our uniforms. One night one prisoner told us in ghastly detail what they had done to a lad who had got behind the column and fallen into their clutches.

'December 24—Christmas Eve.' That entry in my diary was made as I lay on the concrete floor of a prison cell trying to dodge the dribble of stinking water falling from lavatories overhead.

'December 25—Christmas Day.' Twenty miles farther on now and trying to sleep in a hen-house.



By the end of the month most of us were ill. At least five Indians who had worked in the Army bakehouse in Athens had died from exposure.

Few of us had any boots left. Some had PT plimsolls: others had only rags. All of us had lice.

Conditions got worse as we went higher into the mountains. The passes were blocked with snow, and when we reached a village called Rendina we were held up there for two weeks.

Nineteen of us slept in one little room. I was one of four who shared the one blanket we had between us. The two outside men had to pin the edges of the blanket to their trousers and the other two had to wriggle in between them, head to feet. Very soon the scratching and the cursing would begin.

I was sick with dysentery by then. Our only doctor was an RAF medical man who had no supplies apart from sulphur tablets. I had heard of men's hair going white suddenly. Now I saw it happen. The doctor's hair was dark when he joined us: it was snow white before we reached the end of the trek.

One night when I took my boots off I found them half full of blood from my frostbitten feet, and the operation of putting them on again next morning was so painful that I never dared take them off again until the end of the six-week trek.

I had camouflaged my boots with bandages or torn cloth, for I knew that if my guards saw those boots they would rob me of them. I wrapped a bandage round my finger also to hide my gold ring from the eyes of the killer-women.

They had developed an unpleasant technique of singling out one prisoner—one who was weakening on the march—and eventually grabbing him when he lagged behind. Then they would strip him of his clothes and boots. Sometimes that was the worst they did, but other times they would torture him with their knives and mutilate him.

On January 9—the twenty-eighth day of captivity—we left Rendina. During our stay in the village we had made a census of the prisoners. There were now 274 of us.

Our route lay over the mountains to the north of the village. The watching women trailed behind expectantly as we stumbled on in single file through breast-high snow.

Three days later we reached a place called Trikola. Since our capture in Athens we had tramped 250 miles.

At 4 p.m. that afternoon more prisoners arrived—sixty men from the RAF. They were lucky: food had been dropped to them by parachute. But they didn't invite us to share it.

By now, though we of course could not know it, efforts were being made to save us. The British Army was negotiating with the ELAS leaders for an exchange of prisoners.

On January 16 the American Red Cross located us and promised to have supplies flown to us, and next day four Halifax bombers zoomed over the mountains and dropped food and clothes and blankets.

On January 20 more supplies came and on that day, nearly six weeks after being captured, I had a clean shirt, vest and pants.

Now we felt sure that soon we might be freed. The glorious news came at 4 p.m. on January 23. We were given one hour to get ready and at 5 p.m. we began our last tramp . . . the tramp to freedom.

Weak as we were we almost ran the four miles to the main road. There I saw the best sight I had ever seen: about eighty British Army lorries and ambulances waiting for us.

We drove all that night down mountain roads to the coast. It was deadly cold, but we were deliriously happy and at Piraeus on January 27 we had our 'Christmas dinner' and a bottle of British beer each.

On Good Friday, April 3, 1945, I arrived home in Sheffield to meet my 'widow' and see, for the first time since she was born, my three-year-old baby girl.

# ONLY ONE CAME BACK

*by Lawrence Neill*

OUR aircraft were waiting, all bombed up for the big raid. Four times it had been called off—and none of us liked that very much.

Most aircrew lived on their nerves, anyway, and we began to get very depressed.

I stood around near the aircraft, all dressed up and nowhere to go, and watched a little fly floating upside down in a puddle, its struggles almost over. Bending over, I removed it from a watery grave, and placed it on a nearby leaf to dry its delicate wings in the noon-day sun.

The bomb trolleys trundled by. Then, at last, came the signal. The raid was on.

It was a special attack that we in 487 Squadron, RAF, had been briefed for—Operation Ramrod, one of the historic raids of the war.

Fourteen planes were to bomb a power station in the heart of Nazi-occupied Amsterdam, on that day, May 3, 1943.

We clambered aboard our aircraft, a Lockheed Vega Ventura, and I packed myself in the gun-turret.

Up there, under that transparent egg-shell, I had a view of everything—too much of a view, I felt at times.

There were three others in the crew. The pilot was Flight-Lieutenant Arthur Duffil, a young Yorkshireman.

Navigator and bomber was Flying Officer Johnnie Starkie, wireless operator was Sergeant Alan Turnbull.

The twin engines were ticking over. The hatch slammed home with an air of finality, and I sat there awaiting the take-off, envying the ground crews standing in groups round the aircraft.

Three by three the planes roared across the airfield at Methwold, in Norfolk, and lumbered into the air.

Now all tension had gone. The squadron looked beautiful, flying in tight formation, flying into battle.

I was very proud of the RAF. I've never met a man who wasn't. This moment made everything worthwhile.

On we raced, skimming over the flat Norfolk landscape, over the marshes and out to sea. We started our climb just off the Dutch coast, went to 12,000 feet, then levelled off.

In the clear blue above, our fighter escort wove gay patterns.

Then the enemy! Hell, what a sight. They came in at 12,000 feet—the Luftwaffe in all its deadly glory, a battle fleet, eighty strong, of screaming cannon and armour-plate.

I got ready to fight. Guns cocked? Check. Fire and safe-to-fire? Check. Reflector sight on? Check.

Sweat streamed down my cheek, my stomach turned to water and my scalp contracted. Great wads of cannon shell raked through the squadron.

We were already hit. No. 2 below me had become an incandescent ball of flame. I knew every one of its crew.

C-for-Charlie shuddered under the impact of explosions. Slivers of metal rose up and were torn away in the slipstream.

Now No. 3 was out. It disintegrated into a cloud of flying debris. But the squadron flew on.

The German FW190s were coming in at us astern. We were being massacred—our little Brownings against their cannon, our perspex against their armour plate. Our fighter escort was hopelessly outnumbered.

The bastards wouldn't stay in my sight-ring. It had all seemed so easy back in Training Command. All you had to do was to estimate the wing-span of the enemy, find his range, allow for deflection, and fire.

My thumb found the button, the Brownings crackled into life, the stink of hot oil and cordite filled the turret, and the sight-ring danced crazily about.

Then something seemed to snatch my feet away. Warm, sticky blood trickled down my legs into my flying boots.

The Germans were whooping in for the kill. But they were overconfident, and one broke away from formation and recklessly came up on my starboard beam, flying a parallel course.

This was more like it! A no-deflection shot at point-blank range is an air gunner's dream.

He came in, his cannons winking along his wing edge and wads of shell sliding away over my turret.

Then he was at point-blank range; a beautiful duck-egg blue underbelly.

My two Brownings belched into action. A stream of lead gashed into his belly, he shuddered and staggered on the end of my tracers.

My guns streamed and stank, the sun burned into the turret, sweat mingled with blood.

I don't think he ever knew what hit him. The earth just clawed him out of the sky, down, down, down into the murk 12,000 feet below.

I felt no hate; just sick and tired.

But now we also were almost out of the fight. Our aircraft was wallowing about like a wounded pig.

Concentrated gunfire sliced a large hole below me. My turret caught fire and filled my eggshell with fumes of blazing rubber.

It was time to leave. My legs were beginning to throb but I was too scared to find out how badly I was wounded.

Dropping into the body of the aircraft I found a shocking mess.

Control cables were snarled up like loose hair in a comb. Oil was spraying from punctured pipes.

Worse, a red glow and acrid smoke showed that a fire was getting well under way in the tail end.

Groping around I found a fire extinguisher and hammered it against the turret support. But the damned thing only dribbled and I flung it away.

I was panicking, and I realized that was fatal. So, gathering my wits, I made for the other extinguisher.

Then I sank to the floor and studied the instructions printed on its side.

Outside the battle still raged. A row of holes suddenly tagged across the side of the fuselage, and my arm was snatched back.

I felt that warm, sticky trickle again, this time down my arm.

At last I got the extinguisher going, and under its spray the red glow died.

I staggered forward and met Alan, the wireless operator.

His ankle had been gashed by a cannon shell and he was losing a lot of blood.

Johnnie, the navigator, joined me and between us we got Alan into a corner, and foraged around for the first-aid kit.

While the plane bucked and tossed, we managed to get a tourniquet on his leg and injected morphia.

Then we saw that although the bomb-bay doors were open, our 500-pounder was still there hanging ugly and dangerous amid the chewed-up release mechanism.

We knew we must get rid of this deadly load, so we tried to poke it free with a cleaning rod, but it was a hopeless task.

I went back to Alan and released his tourniquet. The blood pumped out of his ankle and sprayed over my face and clothing. I felt sick and was beginning to weaken.

I hadn't the strength to move much now, and slid to the floor.

But it is unpleasant being in an aircraft without being able to see out, so at last I stumbled to the hatch and peered out.

The battle had receded. Pilot Arthur Duffil was heading back home hoping the burning plane would make it, praying he would be able to land, with both engines hit and the flaps not working.

And, of course, with that bomb still hanging from the belly of our plane.

So we came back, the only plane left of our squadron—the fly left on a leaf to dry in the sun.

Circling several times, Arthur fired off his remaining Very cartridges to indicate distress and then began dropping. The aircraft floundered down. The ugly bomb swung in its belly.

I saw the grass rushing up to meet us. Crunch!

If that bomb went off, I thought, people would come and look at a hole in the grass runway.

The plane slid a little, then she came to an abrupt halt. My heart leaped. We had come home.

They lifted me and Alan out and popped us in the ambulance. Arthur Duffil and Johnnie Starkie were miraculously unhurt.

At the station they were waiting for the return of 487 Squadron.

The tables were laid, and they were cooking eggs and bacon for fifty-six hungry aircrew.

But only two men, the pilot and navigator of one of our aircraft, came back to eat that meal.

Some were dead, some were prisoners and Alan and I were in hospital.

*It was the end of 487 Squadron as we had known it.*

# JUNGLE WALK

*by Robert Dalrymple*

"MY SPITFIRE dropped a sheer 300 feet, plummeting down through a chaos of black cloud and cascades of monsoon rain. She finished with a jolt like that of a ship hitting a quay-side head-on.

Down there lay the uncharted Burmese jungle, its dark swamps and riverbeds full of unimaginable terrors, and its few tracks patrolled by the occupying Japanese.

The day was Friday, 3rd September 1943—four years almost to the minute since war was declared. For months I had been flying with 155 Squadron in close support to the Army, escorting aircraft that were dropping supplies to our troops isolated many miles behind the Jap lines.

I baled out. Spitfire DG-L bucketed on through the storm and I dropped through 8,000 feet or more of piled-up cloud, buffeted in all directions by fierce air currents.

Suddenly I was free of cloud. All was clear and I saw tree-tops rushing up.

They seemed to come up and hit me, battering their way past me, crash upon crash.

It was probably as well that I didn't descend more gently. The force of impact drove me down through the tree-tops, and if I'd stuck on the top I might still be there—a skeleton.

Down there below the trees, when I'd got my wind and



my sense back and freed myself from the parachute, it all seemed unexpectedly dark and quiet.

I took a compass bearing and found the direction I ought to go. It was a good thing that I was hazy about how far I had to go: the thought of seventy miles of jungle between me and the airstrip might have made me despair.

I set off. I was going downhill, following the beginnings of some stream which at that height had little or no water in it.

But soon it deepened, and the jungle came crowding down on the watercourse so closely that I couldn't climb out of it.

The water lapped around my knees. I tried to peer ahead, but the tangled mass of leaves and roots and trunks and creepers made an impenetrable screen.

Above it was probably broad daylight: down there it was dark with a slimy green seabed kind of darkness, and the sense of being underwater was heightened by the steady sluicing down of the rain.

Hour after hour I slithered down that watercourse, until the stream became a fast-flowing river that swirled around my waist.

The banks rose vertically ten to fifteen feet and were bounded right to the edge by dense jungle growth.

Twice I was swept off my feet by the current. Weak, hungry, soaked and miserable I sought for a place to rest and at last saw a kind of hole in the bank.

It looked like an animal's lair and cautiously I peeped inside. But there was no one at home, so I crawled in and made myself a bed by tearing out the bracken-like undergrowth, fine roots and dead leaves.

I was settling down to sleep when I noticed that from the waist down my flying suit was stained with blood.

I had at no time been conscious of pain or hurt and, fearfully, I began to strip.

I soon found out the source of the blood. Four great

bloated leeches were fastened around my waist and hung there, all swollen with the blood they had gorged.

Where two others had been, and dropped, surfeited or dislodged, were two leaking sores.

With a 'leech stick'—the chemically impregnated stick which was part of our standard tropical escape kit—I got rid of the disgusting creatures, but to this day I bear scars that remind me of this loathsome jungle company.

Then I saw others of them crawling about the floor and walls of my den, no doubt attracted by the scent of blood.

They were dirty-looking things, like fat, pale-brown slugs, raising their heads as they advanced on me. I squashed those I could see, but, remembering the nasty tales I had heard of leeches, I didn't dare to sleep, and, after dozing fitfully for an hour or two, I decided to press on down river.

My spirits sank to zero as the day wore on. Wading, sometimes up to the armpits, in that great airless, lightless silence was unnerving.

I found myself beginning to talk aloud, even talking to the piece of branch I had torn down to probe the riverbed ahead of me.

I never came, as I hoped, to a rock high enough from the water on which I could rest and examine my body to make sure no more loathsome leeches had found their way into my flying suit.

Complete exhaustion was not far away when I came to a patch of shingle clear of the water. It was no bigger than a table top, but for me it was absolute salvation.

I lay there for a while, until some strength returned to me, then stripped stark naked, spread my clothes to dry and ate a few energy tablets and a piece of chocolate from my kit.

Blood still seeped from the leech bites, but there were no more of the pests on me and a closer inspection reassured me that none had entered my body.

I checked my route by compass and realized I had got

to leave the river which was now leading me dangerously near to the region occupied by the Japs.

Leaving the river was a desperately difficult job. When I climbed the bank I had literally to hack my first step into the undergrowth with the kukri—the curved native knife from the escape kit.

Each yard I moved in I had to check my compass bearings again to make sure, after cutting the undergrowth, I was still on course.

That routine—hacking a few steps' advance, pushing through the clutching branches and creepers, and then checking my course—was to be my unvarying, exhausting routine for another day and a half.

But I was going uphill and when, on the second day, I reached 3,000 feet the growth thinned a bit and I reached a tiny clearing.

I decided to call it a day and sat down to eat some more tablets.

Immediately I saw the leeches again. They came towards me, sliding over the grass, rearing their heads as though to smell out their prey.

Even today that foul sight often comes back to me, not only in dreams but often when I am awake.

In a fury I crushed dozens of them underfoot, but even so I realized I dare not sleep on the grass.

Desperate in my desire for rest I climbed into the fork of a huge bush of rhododendron type and lashed myself to a branch with my revolver belt.

There, shivering in the clammy cold of the jungle night, I dozed away another miserable hour or two until dawn was near and then set off again.

Now I was going downhill again and soon I was once more having to hack my way through jungle growth, until—now it was the afternoon of my third day in the jungle—I broke through into another clearing.

This clearing was obviously man-made and flanked by a hillside into which a cavern had been dug.

I noticed, almost subconsciously, as I stepped towards the cave that its opening commanded a magnificent field of fire, though what there was to protect or what there was to fire at heaven only knew.

Remembering, however, the notices I had so often seen on the walls of Army huts advising us if we met a Jap and a snake together on a road we had to shoot the Jap first, I drew my revolver and cocked it as I stepped towards the cave.

Suddenly, I halted. In the pale-green jungle light I saw the glimmer of metal. But nothing moved. Nor was there a sound, except the incessant sough of the falling rain.

I crept nearer. At the lip of the cave, tilted slightly forward, was a Japanese helmet. Poking ahead of it was the muzzle of a Japanese rifle.

But now I could see beyond the helmet. The Jap behind it was dead. Safely dead, for little remained of him but bones, some shreds of clothing and blackened flesh, and the foul sweet odour of death.

I stepped as near to him as I could stomach, and peered into the dug-out. There in the dank darkness at least a dozen corpses lay about, grotesquely tumbled and horribly undulating in their shrouds of ants and maggots and leeches and insects innumerable.

Perhaps they had been bombed or machine-gunned from the air, but I didn't stop to look for evidence. The stench was too appalling.

I realize now that the sight of the dug-out should have encouraged me.

Its presence indicated that I must be near some recognized track through the jungle. Actually I was, but I was pressing on roughly parallel to the track and seeing nothing but the unnerving pattern of jungle.

I sat down to rest. I was still clutching my revolver and, engulfed now in utter hopelessness and despair, I saw this weapon as the only thing left to save me from the long-

drawn-out agony of death in the jungle.

In one split second I could make a swift clean end of misery. What prevented me?

It certainly wasn't lack of courage, for at that moment it took more fortitude to contemplate pressing on through the green horror of the silent jungle than pressing the trigger.

My wife and daughter saved me. The thought of my wife, far away in Glasgow and yet seeming at that moment very near to me, and the thought of my three-month-old daughter, the baby girl I had not yet seen and yet craved so much to see and know, forced me to stand up again, lift the kukri and once again begin hacking through the jungle.

Three successive ridges I crossed that afternoon, and I was on the crest of the third, wondering where and how I should spend another night, when I saw below me what was unmistakably a path.

My eyes had only just lighted on it when I heard voices. I drew back into the shelter of the undergrowth to watch.

Two dark-skinned men appeared along the path. One of them wore a khaki shirt over his loincloth and both carried British rifles.

My heart leaped with joy as I ran down to the track. They were Karens, those local hillmen whose ancestors were dreaded headhunters adept at shrinking the heads of their dead enemies.

Some of them, I had heard, were still headhunters and considered, by civilized people, savages, but all I knew was that all through the dark days of our early defeats in the East, these hillfolk had remained friendly to the British and many of them had been tortured to death by the Japs for aiding British soldiers and stranded airmen.

When I reached the path and shouted they swung round, their rifles at the ready, but their faces broke into grins and

one asked, in English: 'You British airman?' He came running up to me with obvious joy at being able to help me. 'Come to village,' he invited.

I was drunk with joy, I think. I remember that on the way we got so friendly and high-spirited that we began firing shots and were soon indulging in shooting contests at targets in the trees—I with my revolver and they with their rifles.

It made me quite conceited that after all I had been through I could still equal or even outshoot them, and they laughed and clapped me on the back.

The one who spoke English told me that an American missionary had taught him the language. 'Me Christian man,' he declared, proudly.

Their village was a little huddle of huts, built cottage-shape of bamboo, and at the entrances were tall poles.

I saw what I thought were little ornaments on the tops of some of the poles. Then I realized they were heads, human heads, leathery, wrinkled and shrunken to the size of small coconuts.

I've a feeling that some of the ornaments had distinctly Japanese features, but my examination of them was cut short by villagers flocking forward to greet me.

Some of the men, I noticed, wore khaki shorts of British Army cut. All of them carried rifles.

They crowded round, smiling at me, and escorted me to a low stool below the verandah of what I guessed was the Council House of the village, and opposite me was the Chief's Throne, a beautifully and intricately carved arm-chair.

The Chief was an old man, with a thin white wisp of beard and a small slender figure, but he was most impressive, serene and dignified.

As he sat down before me an attendant placed in his hands a porcelain mug which he handed to me, making motions inviting me to drink.

It was rice wine, very sweet but pleasant to the palate and with the potency of really strong whisky.

With my friend as interpreter I told my story, and the Chief offered me the hospitality of his village. He invited me to drink again, pointed out the hut I must accept as my home while I was with them and then, with a smile, indicated the maiden I could share it with.

She was standing not far away, a graceful girl with jet black hair, smiling eyes, coffee-coloured skin and a sarong of soft linen swathed around her slim figure.

I shook my head. The Chief smiled more invitingly. The girl, he assured me, was a virgin.

As politely as I could I declined this village hospitality, and assured the Chief that all I desired at the moment was sleep.

But first I must eat, he said, and a great repast of chicken and potatoes and delicately cooked vegetables was placed before me.

After I had disposed of that, and several more mugs of rice wine, I was led to my hut. There was a simple bed there—a wooden frame with a mattress of interwoven hemp—but as I sank on to it and stretched out I had just time to notice, before I drifted into blissful sleep, that the blankets were of the good old Army-issue type.

Next morning I had breakfast in bed—bread and a bowl of exotic fruits and mugs of something that looked and tasted not unlike tea.

I was almost sorry when my guides came to lead me to the main road leading to the valley and my Squadron.

The English-speaking Christian—now my firm friend—led me for three hours along the jungle tracks to the road where, he told me, British army lorries passed.

Sure enough, one did come. As I climbed aboard I gave him the money belt containing silver rupees and asked him to stand treat to all in the village. And I am sure he did.

As we drove off I heard him singing, in the genuine

accents of Chicago:<sup>6</sup> 'We will meet, you and I, in the sweet  
bye-and-bye.'

I hope so, for he and his fellow Karens I shall always  
remember as the comrades who saved me from despair and  
death in the jungle.